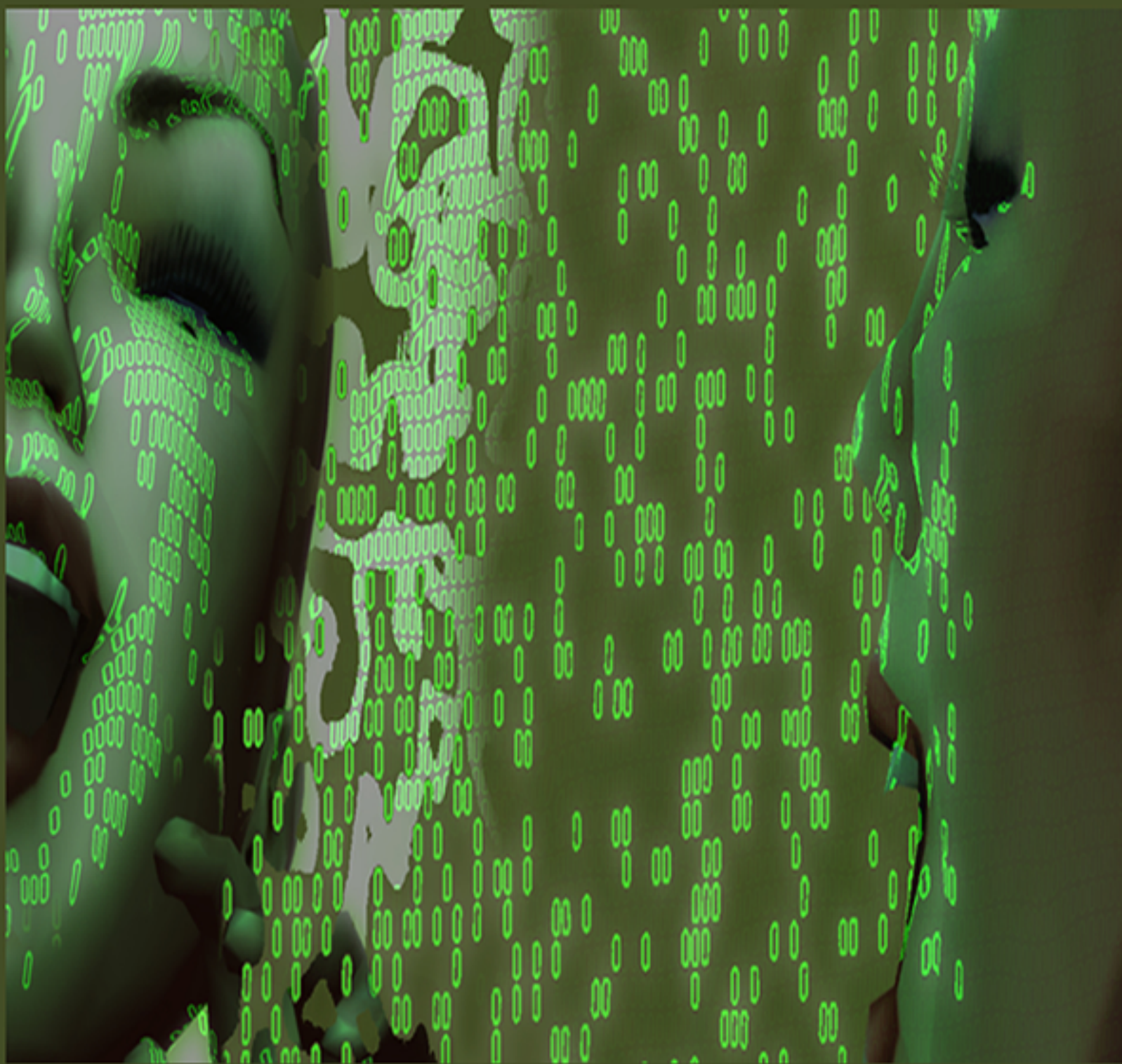


Social Networking, The “Third Place,” and The Evolution of Communication



A White Paper from the New Media Consortium

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The New Media Consortium’s Series of Online Conferences is designed to explore emerging topics in education and technology, using current communication technologies to bring people together online in a way that offers many of the same affordances of a face-to-face conference. Of particular importance are opportunities for the kinds of social interactions that make in-person conferences so valuable: hallway conversations, end-of-the-day informal gatherings, opportunities to speak with presenters in between sessions, and highly interactive breakout sessions that invite participation from the audience.

As part of a new approach to how we design our online conferences, this paper is being released in advance of the NMC Online Conference on the Evolution of Communication to spark discussion, discourse, and especially critical thinking on the topic. This first topical paper is being released in a form that encourages discussion and that itself embodies the topic of the changing nature of communication. The conference itself, to be held December 4-5, 2007, will take place in the virtual world of Second Life and will incorporate some of the tools and trends identified here.

The purpose of this white paper is to put forth a proposition that we hope will generate considerable conversation. The premise is simple, but touches on concepts and ideas that are well established within the academy, and as such, it is a topic about which there may be some strongly held perspectives. Our premise is that technology has not only mediated communication in countless ways, but that the very ways we communicate—and even the ways we talk and think about communication—are changing as a result.

Part of this premise is backward looking, in the sense that if we set literature and the creative side of communication aside for a moment, the formal communication strategies we have been taught in schools were often focused on how to convey lots of ideas or information (at relatively infrequent intervals) and generally in the form of written papers (like this one), books, or compilations.

Added to and fueling the premise is an admittedly unscientific assessment of how we have added to those forms in recent years. A look in almost any direction will reveal patterns of communication very different than the traditional writing in which we were trained. Small bursts of information, technology-mediated for the most part, permeate our experiences, and increasingly we have people with whom we are in contact almost constantly—and more so every day, these people are scattered across the globe.

Mediated by new tools and new technologies that have made the marginal cost of long distance communication essentially free, both work and social activities are commonly shared by groups of people who need not be geographically near each other to be close. Our premise, simply put, is that these and similar trends represent a significant shift in the way we interact with others and in the way we understand the nature of those interactions.

This paper is not intended to be a lexicon of terms and definitions. Rather, its focus is to consider the ways that communication is changing and raise the question of how this shift can be applied to teaching, learning and creativity. It is our hope that this paper will

encourage conversation, thinking, projects, and demonstrations that will enrich the *Online Conference on the Evolution of Communication*, and that the dialog begun here will continue beyond the conference.

Communication is (Still) Changing

The nature of communication has undergone a substantial change in the past 20 years—and the change is not over. Email has had a profound effect on the way people keep in touch. Communications are shorter and more frequent than when letters were the norm; response time has greatly diminished; we are even surprised if someone we wish to contact does not have an email address. Although there are still a few people who print out their emails in order to read and respond to them, most of us are accustomed to the daily duty of reading and answering emails that have arrived since we turned off the computer the night before, and to keeping up with them as they trickle (or flood) in during the day.

Even as we have gotten used to email, though, the nature of communication continues to change. Instant messaging has created another method of interaction, one where the length of messages is shorter and the style of the interaction is more conversational—but where it is acceptable and common to pay partial attention. Broadcast technologies like Twitter transform these short bursts of communication from one-on-one conversations to little news (or trivia) programs: we can “tune in” when we want an update or have something to say, and “channel surf” to other activities in between updates.

The expectations we place on those we communicate with vary from medium to medium, as has always been the case. Sending a letter through the postal mail sets up an expectation of a response that will come in days; email, in hours; instant messaging, in minutes. We expect the letter-writer to devote a certain amount of time and attention to responding. With email, the expected time investment is smaller. With instant messaging, we understand that the other party’s attention may wander between messages in some cases and remain focused on us, as with a phone call, in others.

New environments like virtual worlds present additional opportunities and challenges for communication. In such settings, there is a visual component to the online interaction that is lacking in email or instant messaging: we can see a “body” that goes with the voice or text conversation. Affordances like this can help foster a feeling of presence and give us clues about when the other person is listening, when he or she wishes to speak, and when his or her attention is directed elsewhere. This is not to say that these environments offer the same contextual cues as face-to-face communication—they do not; but there is an added dimension to interactions in these spaces that does not occur in other online contexts.

Online communication tools also have the potential to increase our awareness of the movements of our professional or social contacts. Twitter, for instance, offers an at-a-glance update of things people we know happen to be doing: who is outside cleaning their gutters, who is writing a new blog post, who is about to have lunch with a friend. Clive Thompson (2007) calls this phenomenon *social proprioception*, named after the physical quality of proprioception that tells a creature where its extremities are by the reception of stimuli produced within the organism. *Social* proprioception tells us where the nodes of our community are and provides a sense of connectedness to and awareness of others without

direct communication. Technologies like Twitter enable us to have this sense even when the members of our community are not within sight.

The Contexts of Online Communication

The context in which an interaction occurs has a profound effect on communication. In face-to-face encounters, factors ranging from psychological to environmental to cultural all have an effect on how the message is transmitted and how it is understood. Online communication is no less subject to context, and may bring with it additional contextual issues that will have an effect on the intended message.

The type of technology being used to facilitate the interaction, for example, has a bearing on the environmental context of the conversation. A conversation taking place through instant messaging in between meetings will have a different flavor than if the same topic were discussed in a virtual world, on the phone, or in an online meeting room.

The challenge of any communication, that of being understood, exists online as much as—maybe more so than—offline. Posts on threaded discussion forums and instant message communications are notoriously hard to decode correctly because of the lack of nuance. As more people participate in these kinds of communications, signals that were developed to add context to text-based messages, like smileys (☺) and tags (like <rant> </rant>), are slipping into the mainstream. The issue of context is far from solved, though, and continues to surface with each new mode of communication that emerges.

The Internet is the Place

The vehicle for these changes is the Internet. Increasingly, it is the “third place” (the first and second places being home and work) where people connect with friends, watch television, listen to music, build a sense of togetherness with people across the world, and provide expressions of ourselves which are themselves forms of communication. As more people turn to the Internet for professional and social purposes, we are seeing new means of communication, new places to communicate, and new avenues of interaction unfold at a rapid pace.

New means of communication. Internet calling services like Skype or Yahoo! Voice turn a computer, a webcam and a headset into a video phone. Blogs, while not new, have grown in usage over the last few years and are now a common way for many people to communicate their ideas to a broad audience and, in most cases, to hear back from that audience. Both Internet calling and blogs are relatively easy to accept, because they are based on understood models (telephones and magazine columns).

It is more difficult to grasp the potential implications of forms that are not modeled on a comfortable, twentieth-century mode of communication. One such example is Twitter: Twitter users post short messages that usually have to do with whatever is happening to them at the time—whether it is intellectual, practical, social, or professional in nature—to create an ongoing log of activity across a community at the minute-by-minute level. Twitter is

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