

Chapter LXII

Instant Messaging as a Hypermedium in the Making

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ABSTRACT

The recent rise of Instant Messaging systems as a centerpiece of online communication has brought with it many questions about the role this new medium will play in the communicative sphere. As the medium has evolved, it has grown to subsume many traditional communication technologies, merging their individual capabilities. In this chapter, a cross-section of popular and established technologies is examined and a strata of affordances introduced, describing the media's capacity for tasks enabled through their message transport. Through this framework the modern medium of Instant Messaging is compared against these other technologies in terms of the affordances offered by each and the argument presented that IM is evolving to subsume many of the traditional communicative mediums into a single communications hub, or hypermedium.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, Instant Messaging has slowly but surely gained ground as one of the most predominate forms of online communication. The popular press has trumpeted each new feature introduced to IM that brings it into the domain of yet another medium. With the latest push into IM-based telephony, pundits have predicted that IM will become the new hub of communication, with all the user's communicative needs handled by a single medium (Stone, 2005).

Instant Messaging was arguably born to the world on December 19, 1973, with the release of PLATO TERM-talk at the University of Illinois (Dear, 2002). Constrained by the computer technology of its time, it was a primitive text-only medium with stringent limitations. While a number of derivative systems were developed in the following two decades, all forced the sender to "make 'blind' calls, hoping that the recipient [was] available to take the call...[since] such systems lack[ed] presence-awareness (Greene & Mahony, 2004, p. 55). The introduction of the ICQ network in 1996 heralded the dawn of the

modern IM system, in which users were able to “see” who was available for communicating (Greene & Mahony, 2004).

In its text-only form, IM is “betwixt and between” other forms of communication, “represent[ing] a new liminality in communication because it resides inside the cracks that separate and permeate written and oral forms of communication (Davey et al., n.d., p. 9). The medium lacks even a common terminology as users describe themselves as “chatting ... typing ... writing ... talking ... speaking ... saying” (Davey et al., n.d., p. 9). Paradoxically, it is also “an intrinsically visual medium, something that is antithetical to our traditional conception of oral (and aural) communication” (Davey et al., n.d., p. 9).

Instant Messaging is often employed in a highly-multitasking environment. Twenty percent of IM users “say they do something else off their computer, such as talk on the phone or watch television virtually every time they are Instant Messaging,” while 30% multitask at least some of the time (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004, p. iv). This multitasking has made IM extremely popular with teenage users (Grinter & Palen, 2002). Software vendors have added video and audio channels in an attempt to convince users to perform more of their multitasking within the same medium.

Away messages, in particular, have become an important method of communication. While profiles tend to be long-term expressions of a user’s online identity, away messages represent a mechanism to express short-term information in broadcast form. Once simple messages proclaiming “I am away from my computer right now,” away messages have evolved into a parallel communications channel used “to initiate contact or help plan a social event, to send messages to particular other people, [or] to convey personal information about the message poster...” (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004, p. 9). Of adult IM users, 18% use away messages “every day or almost everyday” (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004, p. 9). It is interesting to

note that 12% of users use their away messages to “switch communication media by posting a phone number where they can be reached” (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004, p. 9), a fact not lost on IM vendors rushing to add new telephony features to their offerings.

BACKGROUND

In order to examine the role IM plays in the greater sphere of communication, it is necessary to compare it against existing media and the affordances they offer. A cross-section of technologies must be introduced, representing many of the common media in use today, together with emergent ones just beginning to take over certain communicative genres. The conveyance of thought lies at the root of communication, and a medium extends that conveyance by supporting it across time or space, or by enhancing it in selective ways.

To evaluate the ways in which these media influence or enhance the communicative process, a set of *affordances* is introduced. These range from basic characteristics, like whether it enables asynchronous or synchronous conversations, to derived measures like its capacity for community building. Through this stratum of media and affordances, the role of each in the communicative process may be thoroughly examined.

With the rise of the Internet, a greater percentage of communications are occurring in this new venue. According to a 2004 Pew report, “on a typical day...some 70 million American adults logged onto the Internet to use e-mail, get news...and engage in countless other activities” (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004, p. 58). While “for the most part, the online world mirrors the offline world...people bring to the Internet the activities, interests, and behaviors that preoccupied them before the Web existed,” the study notes the Internet “has also enabled new kinds of activities that no one ever dreamed of doing before—certainly not in the way people are do-

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