

Chapter XXX

Being Face to Face: A State of Mind or Technological Design?

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ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces the Bourdieuean habitus and field theory as a framework for an alternative way of investigating how perceptions of Media Rich Conferencing Technologies (MRCT) such as video conferencing, Access Grid and Telepresence systems affect approaches to their design, implementation and application, and the ways in which they are utilized by end users. The habitus and field theory is utilized to provide a break-way from prevalent models of analyzing technology uptake and innovation diffusion and provides a new framework for positioning the MRCT as a social construct operating within interrelating social, economic, environmental, and technological systems. This new positioning opens the way for an alternative view of the role of MRCT and facilitates new approaches to their design

Technology is assumed to be designed, developed, and produced by engineers... The orderly image of technical development, so pervasive in all but the most recent technology studies, is not only too simple—it is wrong

—W.E. Bijker

INTRODUCTION

Various Media Rich Conferencing Technologies (MRCT) such as Video Conferencing, Access Grid, and the more recently developed Telepres-

ence systems all promise to enable geographically dispersed people to ‘meet’ in an almost true to life fashion and engage in an almost real face-to-face interaction without the need to travel or physically collocate.

The notion of using electronic telecommunications for enabling geographically dispersed people to connect is not new, and has been around since the first days of the telephone. However, the convergence of multimedia aspects such as video and graphics with telecommunications triggered the notion that these could be used to facilitate a close to real life communication experience (Egido, 1988), and bring telecommunication closer to the gold standard of communication, the face-to-face (FTF) interaction. The reason for this highly regarded capacity of FTF is said to reside in their ability to provide the most robust form of interactions, entailing multiple channels of communication, and various forms of embodiment and practices. Since the debut of video conferencing in the 1960s designers and engineers have been developing and trialling numerous solutions devised to enhance the performance of MRCT and bring them closer to producing FTF experience. Today, state of the art technologies offer high definition studio quality audiovisual signals to be experienced in specially fitted rooms designed to create an immersive surrounding that will emulate FTF. However, uptake of these technologies is lower than anticipated (Frost & Sullivan., 2005; Hirsh, Sellen, & Brokopp, 2005; Sankar, 2006; Vilaboy, 2007), implying that expectations have not been fully met and the FTF experience has not yet been satisfactorily transported to the world of telecommunications.

The concept of mimicking FTF experience spawned the notion that MRCT will reduce the need to travel to meetings. Proponents describe the technology as an effective solution for conducting a cheaper, greener and quicker alternative to business travel (Beattie & Greenberg, 2007; Irwin, 2004). These promises are especially attractive in today's Knowledge Economy, which is reliant on interdependent production processes and requires collaboration across often geographically dispersed sites (Toffler, 1990). Furthermore, the promise to reduce travel carries the prospect of diminishing carbon emissions which is an appealing argument in today's society concerned about global warming. However, although companies,

governments, and other institutions are launching climate policies and strategies, the deployment of greener meeting practices remains a challenge. A Wainhouse Research¹ analyst in an interview to the International Herald Tribune pointed out that the level of purchases of low and medium price range MRCT systems is still lower than anticipated, and sales are growing at about 20 % a year. The top quality telepresence systems promising the ultimate experience make just one percent of the total videoconferencing sales (Burnham -Finney, 2007). Adopters of MRCT report a relatively low correlation between use of MRCT and travel reduction. Results of Chatsworth Communications' FTSE 100 companies survey released in May 2008 show that only 5 % of respondents claimed to be reducing business travel through the use of video conferencing (Maung, 2008).

Numerous attempts have been launched in search for the reasons leading to the low uptake of MRCT and the changes needed for improving the situation. Some studies focused on issues of infrastructure, cost, or user awareness as possible barriers to uptake (Frost & Sullivan., 2005; Hirsh et al., 2005; Sankar, 2006; Vilaboy, 2007), others studied the effect social presence and media richness have on user experience (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002; Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis & Valacich, 1999; Goffman, 1963; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Wainfan & Davis, 2004). Innovation diffusion studies looked at processes of adoption of MRCT (Molina, 1997; Voss, Mascord, Fraser, Jirotko, Procter, Halfpenny, Fergusson, Atkinson, Dunn, Blanke, Hughes, & Anderson, 2007). The plethora of approaches may indicate the complexity of the implementation of MRCT, however, the multiplicity of views is also contributing confusion to decision making processes attempting to implement the technology and diffuse its application.

Other approaches to the analysis of the level of uptake concentrate on improving the experience of the users and have invested considerable amounts of resources in enhancing the design of MRCT, improving the network infrastructure, developing

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