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In the Lecture Hall, A Geek Chorus [CORRECTED]

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CORRECTION: An article in Circuits last Thursday about wireless online chat among audience members during conferences omitted part of the title of a computer game being developed by Ludicorp, a company whose chief executive was irritated by the practice at a recent **conference**. It is Game Neverending, not just Neverending.

AT the University of Maryland, it started as an innocent question posed in an e-mail message to those attending WebShop, a three-week lecture series about the Internet.

"Does anyone else think it would be a good idea if we all had IM available to us during these lectures?" asked Sinan Aral, a doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, referring to instant messaging. "Several times after questions, I wanted to 'whisper' to someone across the room or send a relevant link."

Mr. Aral discovered that he was not alone. The next day in the auditorium, which was outfitted with a wireless link to the Internet, a group of people booted up their laptops, opened their IM programs and spent the next three hours happily exchanging notes during the presentations.

The "IM circle," as it became known at the June lecture series, soon attracted more than a dozen people at a time. As the speakers ran through their PowerPoint presentations, the room hummed with the tip-tap of IM chatter.

"Is this really an economic issue?" wrote one audience member in response to a presenter's remark. "Experiments like this are too structured," wrote another. "Did he really just say that?" asked one. "Wow! He did," someone responded.

Over the past year, as wireless networks have been introduced in hotels, university auditoriums and **conference** halls, people with laptops have realized that they do not have to sit idly during the presentations. Some people, of course, ignore speakers entirely by surfing the Web or checking their e-mail -- a practice that has led some lecturers to plead for connectionless auditoriums or bans on laptop use.

But others are genuinely interested in a lecturer's topic and want to talk concurrently about what is being said. They may also like to pass around links to Web sites that relate to, and may refute, a speaker's point. For them, wireless technology allows a back channel of communication, a second track that reveals their thoughts and feedback and records it all for future reference.

Cory Doctorow, a science fiction writer and blogger who has experienced this back-channeling at several international technology meetings, likens the chatter to what happens in the corridor just after people leave a **conference** session.

"We're just moving the corridor into the room and time-shifting it by 30 minutes," said Mr. Doctorow, who takes notes and posts them to his Weblog, or blog, during conferences, enabling people to follow the speaker and Mr. Doctorow's take on the speaker at the same time.

Clay Shirky, an adjunct professor in New York University's interactive telecommunications program, has run experiments using messaging software to supplement face-to-face meetings of 30 people. Many participants find the experience highly stimulating, he said, explaining, "The intellectual quality of a two-track meeting is extraordinarily high, if it is run right and you have smart people involved."

But many speakers at the front of room are less enamored of the practice.

"To me, it's a little irritating, frankly," said Stewart Butterfield, chief executive of Ludicorp, a company that is developing Neverending, a multiplayer online game. In April, Mr. Butterfield addressed a **conference** on emerging technologies as listeners experimented with messaging software, including a program called Confab offered by his own company. The next week, when he spoke at a **conference** without any Internet access, "people were a lot more attentive," he said. (He added, however, that many of them kept opening their laptops during the speeches in the vain hope that somehow the Internet might have magically become available.)

Indira Guzman, a doctoral student and adjunct professor at Syracuse University who was at the WebShop lecture series, said she had become aware of the back-channeling while teaching her classes. "You realize that something is going wrong," Ms. Guzman said. "You think, 'Uh-oh, maybe they are talking about me.'"

Some people who have experienced the phenomenon cite a speech given last year at a computer industry **conference** by Joe Nacchio, former chief executive of the telecommunications company Qwest. As he gave his presentation, two bloggers -- Dan Gillmor, a columnist for The San Jose Mercury News, and Doc Searls, senior editor for The Linux Journal -- were posting notes about him to their Weblogs, which were simultaneously being read by many people in the audience.

Both included a link forwarded by a reader in Florida to a stock filing report indicating that Mr. Nacchio had recently made millions of dollars from selling his company's stock, although he complained in his speech about the tough economy. "No sympathy here," Mr. Gillmor wrote.

"When Dan blogged that, the tenor of the room changed," Mr. Doctorow said. Mr. Nacchio, he said, "stopped getting softball questions and he started getting hardball questions."

Some people are hoping that conferences will evolve to allow the undercurrent of conversation to be projected on a big screen in the front of the room. They say that such public disclosure will enable speakers and unconnected audience members to feel less isolated.

Mr. Shirky, the adjunct N.Y.U. professor, considers openness to be critical to productive discussions and conducts his messaging-software experiments so that all speakers can see what is being posted. At the University of Maryland, where the use of IM became a matter of a heated debate, several students said they were perturbed by the back channeling not because it seemed rude (although some argued that point, too), but because they felt left out.

The split focus of two-track meetings and back-channeled conversations have other drawbacks, not the least of which is that they can be utterly distracting. "There were times when I'd follow a thread and come back to the lecture and feel a little disoriented," Mr. Aral acknowledged.

Joichi Ito, a venture capitalist and former chief executive for the Japanese branch of the Internet service provider PSINet, opened a chat room for back-channeling during **Supernova**, a communications **conference** held this month in Crystal City, Va., just outside Washington. But Mr. Ito readily acknowledges the downside. "There is definitely a lot less focus in the room," he said, "but I think we were already starting to suffer from that."

At high-tech conferences where everyone is already wired to the gills with BlackBerry pagers and cellphones and can cope easily with constant connectedness and streaming information, the concept of multitrack communication channels almost seems matter-of-course. "This is not something that is going to go away," Mr. Ito said. As many technology experts point out, if laptops were banned, people would use cellphones. If wireless Internet access were not officially available, networking gurus would find a way to create ad hoc connections.

Some observers say that the multitrack channels will simply be considered a given by a young generation that has honed multitasking to a fine art and grew up on VH1's "pop-up" videos, in which commentary about the artists pops up on the screen during the song.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ito is already creating a new riff on the concept. He said he was working with a group on designing a "hecklebot," a light-emitting diode screen that displays heckling messages that are typed during online chats at conferences. "I want to make something that I can put in a suitcase and take to conferences," he said. He describes it as a subversive device that will get people thinking about the significance of the back channel. From the chat room, he said, "you could send something like, 'Stop pontificating.'"

If the speakers were logged on, they could play the game, too. Maybe some would type, "Pay attention."

Photo: DID YOU HEAR THAT ONE? -- The widening practice of instant messaging during conferences has led some speakers to request a ban on laptops or on wireless access. At the **Supernova conference** this month outside

Washington, some participants were listening and some were messaging. (Jason DeFillippo)(pg. G4)

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