

Beyond Being There - A Summary

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F2F - Face to Face

CMC - Computer Mediated Communication

Research on improving communication through electronic media is guided by the unquestioned belief in the efficacy of f2f communication and tries to build systems that mimic the f2f communication. This paper asks if it is the only way to go afford or are there alternative goals communication systems can try to achieve.

Face to Face communication provides a richness of interaction. It has also been observed that the likelihood of collaboration between two individuals falls as the distance between them increases. This is because of the need for a lot of informal interactions to create and maintain a meaningful relationship. Telecommunication research is driven by the grand goal of building systems that ensure that people who are physically away from each other do not experience a disadvantage when compared to those who are colocated.

This approach is imitating f2f has led us from telephone (audio) to Skype (audio and video) and continues to motivate research on holograms (3D presence). However , this is a very limiting approach. When we are trying to imitate something , the imitation will never be as good as the original and there will always be a gap. To illustrate this - consider a group of people located in the same building. They would prefer having a f2f meeting rather than a Skype call despite having the provision to do so. A Skype call is only preferred when there is no possibility of an f2f meeting.

This means that people who are not colocated will not stop being at a disadvantage until the people who are colocated use the same tools as the ones who are not colocated. To illustrate this , we should design shoes rather than crutches - shoes : worn by everyone as it is better than bare foot walking , crutches : an aid until you are back to the natural self.

The authors suggest defining communication in terms of needs, media and mechanisms :

Needs : Needs are human requirements which when met facilitate interaction.

Media : Media is what mediates communication. Viewing physical proximity as just another medium is important and this medium is characterised by its features of 3D visual and auditory channels.

Mechanisms : Mechanisms are ways enabled by the medium to meet the needs of communication. In f2f , these can be things like eye contact , customary shaking hands etc.

If F2F is used as the yardstick to evaluate CMC , we will continue making close enough imitations. It makes us overlook the inherent strengths and mechanisms of the CMC medium and highlights its weaknesses relative to the F2F medium. By treating F2F as just another medium , we ask the questions of what are its weaknesses and if CMC is better in some cases.

Simply put , we need to build tools that go Beyond Being There.

Examples/Illustrations :

- **Email** - Email succeeds as a communication tool by exploiting the asynchronous nature of electronic media. It also meets the

requirement of being used even by people who are colocated for certain communication needs.

- **Ephemeral Interest Groups** - A good informal discussion takes place when there is an opportunity to communicate and a common topic to discuss about. In F2F communication , this happens when both are physically present at the same location. However, this also means that unless both the parties are there for the sole purpose of conversing , the synchronous nature of F2F communication is limiting. Hence , CMC can solve this issue by enabling the formation of truly ephemeral interest groups. The idea is to create a mechanism that attaches a typically short lived discussion to be attached to objects in the electronic space of the community.
- Allowing low cost electronic access to information about others will provide an effective way of learning about people for the first time, decrease the cost of initiating contact, and support the maintenance of interactions over time. This is how most social networks and meet up sites work.

Reader's Thoughts/Conclusion :

The core thesis of the paper is that the notion of F2F communication being the best and the standard every communication system should try to emulate is wrong. As we can see , there are certain properties of CMC which make it more desirable for certain use cases than F2F :

- Anonymity - Anonymous discussion groups for sensitive topics.
- Asynchronous - Provides a longer timescale for the recipient to think and respond.
- Semi Synchronous - Provides the option to create sub-discussions that diverge away from the current tone of discussion for people who arrive late to the discussion.

These advantages cannot be reaped if we don't shift our perspective from trying to build systems that mimic '*being there*' to building systems that go '*beyond being there*'.