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ABSTRACT

A mediated, interpersonal communications model, such as the one proposed, has the potential of countering the popular notion that world cultures are suffering entropy. Two-way television, via cable or video tape, can be a successful mediating factor in establishing better interpersonal communication. Exemplary models of such systems involve interaction that solely uses the medium of closed-circuit television, which allows self- and interpersonal interaction and role perception. Thus, emerging technological developments can create a force for negentropy, especially in the interchange of information. (CH)

Teleconferencing and Social Negentropy

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Part I: A Context for Mediated Group Communication

Among the more popular contemporary myths is the traditionally held belief that society is falling apart -- in our present case, Western Society. Every academic discipline appears to have within its ranks those with a pet set of factors to account for the 'unequivocal evidence' that society is breaking down and entropy is settling in at an accelerated rate. Those who identify themselves as Human Communication scholars will readily recognize that their discipline far from being neglected, has its own articulate spokesmen as leading contributors to this entropic myth.

Entropy, the state of random distribution of matter/energy or formlessness, as it is related to social systems, is based upon a crude analogy with thermodynamic systems, particularly the latter's Second Law which states that in closed systems, entropy tends to increase and never decreases. Briefly, the reasoning goes something like this. Since information, a key communication concept is, as the word suggests, not formlessness, entropy and information are opposing forces within a system. Information is negentropic. (Miller, 1965). From here, it has been further argued that as information tends towards even distribution throughout a society, the society, like gas molecules in a closed container, becomes more entropic. Such phenomena as universal college education, racial integration, Women's Lib, and the guaranteed minimum wage have all been cited as reflections of increasing social entropy in Western society (Katzman, 1970).

The preceding is, of course, an oversimplification of the argument, but hopefully the position has not been greatly misrepresented, for the model is provocative, even if one is somewhat disturbed by the nimble

transition from thermodynamic to social systems.[1] However, it is not the intention of this paper either to debate the fruitfulness of the analogy for exploring social communication, or to question the usefulness of defining social entropy largely in terms of the distribution of information. Both are well beyond the scope of this paper. Neither is this intended as a careful examination of factors that might be affecting the spectrum of shifting energy and information in society.

Rather, it is an attempt to delineate some emerging technological developments that have the potential for distributing information highly selectively and very unevenly in our society. Directly opposed to the position that social entropy is increasing, it can be argued that emerging communication technology, in conjunction with technologies that are already available, will greatly alter the distribution of information in society. And these changes will be negentropic, proportionately more critical information of specific type will be accessible to a relatively few powerful people in the system.

Until very recently, a curious anomaly has existed in the total spectrum of human communication capabilities. With over a hundred million telephones in North America linked by a ubiquitous direct dialing system, it is possible for almost any individual to converse with almost any other person in the system, on the topic of his choice. Also, if the person is not very

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[1] For a more complete discussion of social entropy and information dispersion see Natan Katzman's paper "Social Entropy and Communication Systems", delivered to the International Communication Association, Minneapolis, 1970 or by the same author "Communication Flow and Social Entropy", EKISTICS, 172, 1970..

particular about the topic, a flood of messages are instantly available courtesy of broadcast radio and broadcast television. The existing telecommunication system is highly sophisticated for purposes of interposed person-to-person communication or mass communication. However, if a group of physically separated individuals desire to communicate as a group, the possibilities are much more limited. With the exception of the astronauts and certain members of mission control, and those few who find the telephone conference a rewarding experience, there is little choice but to reduce the physical space by traveling to some agreed upon location. Here the group can meet, as groups have always met, face-to-face. If the volume of literature in the social sciences devoted to the human grouping phenomenon is any measure of its importance, it is indeed a mystery that technology has moved so slowly in the direction of facilitating group interaction.

As enjoyable as travel may be, the increasing complexity of social experience and our espoused value for making decisions based upon all the available information and points of view, would lead one to predict that the familiar face-to-face meeting or conference will soon be significantly supplemented by some form of mediated group communication. This is not to suggest that travelling to meet as a group will either be replaced or reduced by communication technology. On the contrary, the historical evidence of the impact of communication innovations has almost always been associated with an increase, rather than a decrease, in the usage of previously existing communication modes.

It is particularly fashionable these days to predict the future and probably the single factor most responsible for the fadish flood

of scenarios with which we are burdened is the mind scrambling rapidity with which technological advancement occurs. The moonwalks convinced us that probably anything was technologically possible, though not necessarily reproducible. (The decision to abandon the moonwalks and the subsequent dismantelling of the system that conducted the experiment, thereby making replication effectively impossible, perhaps suggests that the nature of scientific evidence no longer demands that evidence be reproducible.)

I hope that by predicting the fairly rapid development of widespread telecommunication systems devoted to mediated group interaction, I am not indulging in mere fantasy by confusing the technologically possible with the probable. Apart from the reasonable argument that such technologies would fill the one major void in the capabilities of the total communication system, it is a simple fact that a variety of systems already exist, are being used in a limited way, and more are being installed and planned.

Among the teleconferencing systems, as they are popularly known, in use today are those of Bell Canada, New York Telephone, Metropolitan Regional Council of New York, the Office of Telecommunications of the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Canadian Department of Communication--all established within the past two years. Systems that have enjoyed high usage for a number of years include those of the Banker's Trust in New York, a seven city network of Boeing, and Confravision of the British Post Office.[2]

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[2]For a more complete list of teleconferencing systems as well as an extensive overview of developments in interposed group communication, see Teleconference Canada Research Plan; a report of the Socio-Economic Planning Branch, Department of Communication, Ottawa, Canada, 1972.

It is not necessary to look carefully at the list of present users to realise economic considerations have been the major factor retarding the growth of teleconferencing systems. The cost of this technology is extremely high, particularly broadband systems that most closely simulate the face-to-face situation. While these systems are likely to remain expensive, the exploitation of the interactive capabilities of cable television[3] should bring down the cost. Also, the desirability of teleconferencing systems will increase as the number of potential teleconferencing nodes in a network increases. As domestic satellites become commonplace, the penetration, saturation and flexibility of cable facilities will increase and CATV will become the major carrier for extensive teleconferencing networks.

It was suggested earlier that emerging developments in communication technology will shift the distribution of information in society in the direction of increasing negentropy. While the satellite boosted interactive capabilities of CATV will almost certainly greatly increase the access to many kinds of information for most individuals in society (see Figure 1), the users of mediated group interaction facilities will be almost exclusively large corporations and governments. Unlike the telephone, the technology for mediated diadic interaction that pervades our society, teleconferencing for mediated group interaction will be the technology for organizaions

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[3] The FCC ruling of March, 1972 that all future cable systems be technologically capable of two-way transmission, suggests that cable's potential for interactive video will soon be realised and that cable will no longer remain essentially a rebroadcasting system for network television.

Figure 1

SOME PROPOSED INTERACTIVE SERVICES FOR CABLE TELEVISION [a] *

Services for Individuals	Services for Business	Services for Government
Interactive instructional programs	Television ratings	Computer data exchange
Fire and burglar alarm monitoring	Utility meter readings	TELECONFERENCING **
Interactive TV games	Control of utility services	Surveillance of public areas
Quiz shows	Opinion polling	Fire detection
Subscription television	Market research surveys	Pollution monitoring
Remote shopping	Computer data exchange	Traffic control
Special interest group conversations	Business transactions	Fingerprint and photograph identification
Electronic mail delivery	Credit checks	Civil defense communications
Electronic delivery of newspapers and periodicals	Signature and photo identification	Area transmitters/receivers for mobile radio
Computer time sharing	Facsimile services	Classroom instructional television
Videophone	Report distribution	Education extension classes
Catalog displays	Industrial security	Televising municipal meetings and hearings
Stock market quotations	Production monitoring	Direct response on local issues
Transportation schedules	Industrial training	Automatic vehicle identification
Reservation services	TELECONFERENCING **	Community relations programming
Ticket sales	Corporate news ticker	Safety programs
Banking services		Various information retrieval services
Inquiries from various directories		Education for the handicapped
Local auction sales and swap shops		Drug and alcohol abuse programs
Direct opinion response on local issues		
Electronic voting		
Subscriber originated programming		
Interactive vocational counseling		
Local ombudsman		
Employment, health care, housing, welfare, and other social service information		
Library reference and other information retrieval services		
Dial-up video and audio libraries		

[a] These services are not all likely to be economically feasible on cable television networks. Some may not even be socially desirable. They have been compiled from various reports, FCC filings, corporate brochures and advertising materials.

* Taken from Baer, W. Interactive Television: Prospects for two-way services on cable. Santa Monica: Rawd Corporation, November 1971.

** Emphasis added.

with the economic resources to pay and the organizational demands for such a service. The implications for corporate and governmental structure, and in turn society as a whole, are significant.

The preceding has been an attempt to justify the position that widespread interposed group communication as a phenomenon in a technologically advanced society is very probable. It is now in its infancy. But the evidence appears quite clear. With or without the benefit of Human Communication scholars and researchers, communication engineers and systems designers will develop systems and they will be used. I personally do not feel that the various areas of Human Communication investigation should continue to neglect the man/machine interface. Communication technology is not going to go away and let us get on with the business of humanizing ourselves. An increasing proportion of what passes for human communication will be machine mediated and, if human communication is what we say we are t, we must allocate more of our limited human resources to understanding its mediated aspects, or continue to be irrelevant to these developments. Teleconferencing is, of course, only one of many facets of mediated communication requiring intensive investigation before we can hope to begin to develop powerful theories of contemporary human communication. However, its relevance especially to small group theory, and organizational communication theory appears to be limited only by imagination and energy.

Part II: A Field Experiment in Mediated Group Communication[4]

Part I of this paper briefly contextualized the investigation of mediated group interaction. This seemed appropriate since there is neither an historical parallel nor an accumulation of supportive research data that can be cited to justify its study as being squarely within an existing research tradition. Certainly communication in face-to-face groups is a well researched phenomenon and a few laboratory experiments have been conducted to determine a variety of factors affected by mediated communication in two-person situations. However, the writer is aware of no studies that have investigated the communication effects of mediated group communication.

Broadly stated, the objectives of the study, which began in mid-January, 1973, are (1) to generate information pertinent to a comprehensive understanding of the human effects of teleconferencing phenomena, and (2) to contribute to the development of appropriate methodologies and measures for evaluating the behavioural effects and effectiveness of broadly defined teleconferencing systems. Rather than testing a few specific hypotheses under adequate experimental control, the decision was made to design a rather extensive but exploratory field experiment with a minimum of experimental manipulation. This would allow for the collection of a variety of different kinds of information that would provide baseline data about mediated group interaction.

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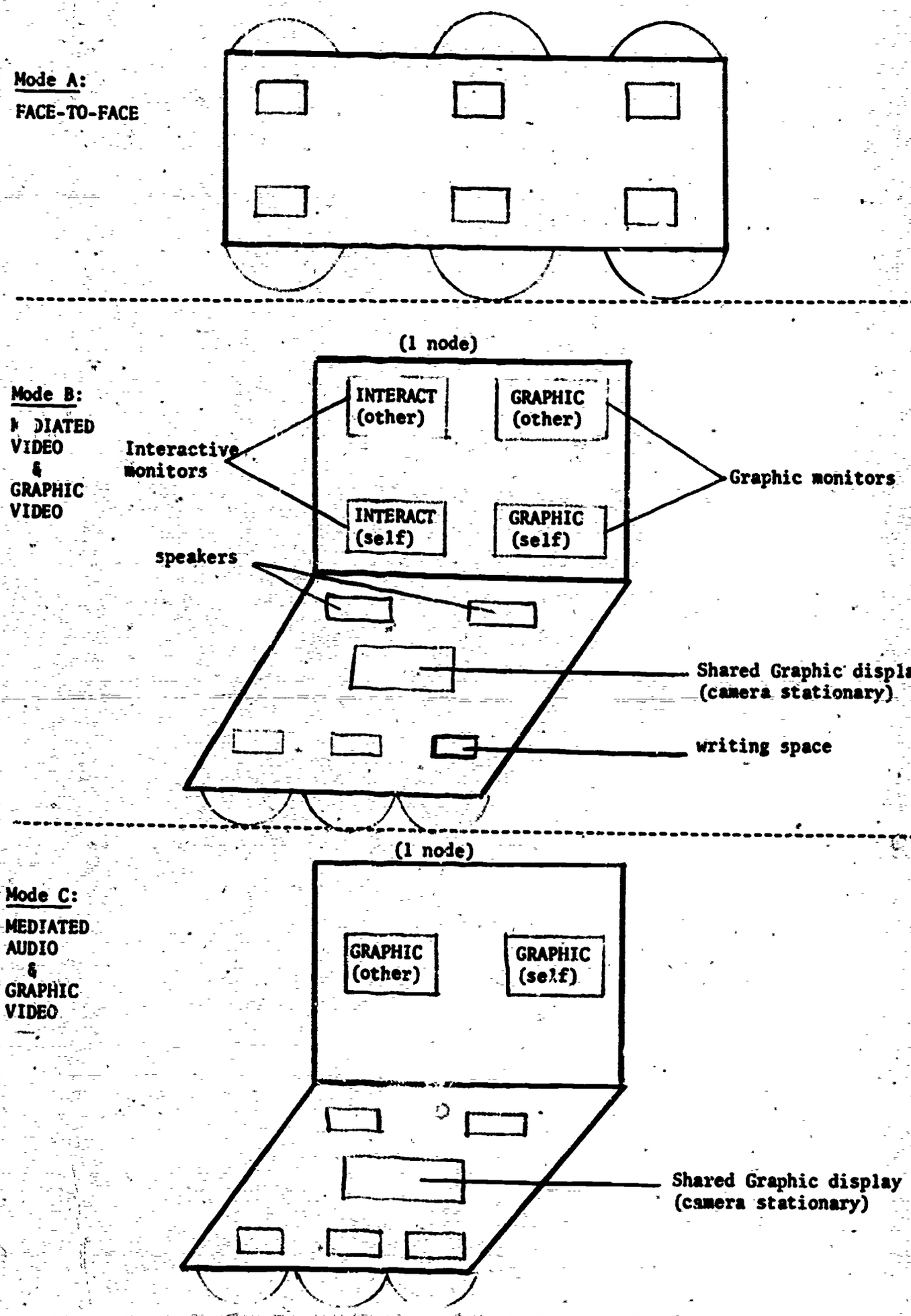
[4] C. Kristen, Department of Communication, University of Montreal, is a coinvestigator with the writer in the study.

Two basic teleconferencing modes were selected for the study. While the actual variations of teleconferencing facilities potentially available is virtually unlimited, they are now, and will continue to be, of two basic types, namely narrowband and broadband installations. Narrowband systems are essentially audio interactive systems, although narrowband does permit a variety of supplementary communication capabilities such as visual graphic display, slow scan and facsimile. Such systems do not have video interactive capability but are relatively inexpensive. Broadband systems are fully video interactive systems. In this study a relatively simple mono audio system augmented by television monitors for displaying graphic material was used, as it represented a satisfactory simulation of a basic narrowband system. The other condition was a video system where those at one node could view those at the other node on a television monitor. The systems were identical in every respect except that in the video system participants could see each other as well as any graphic material presented. For purposes of comparison, there was also a face-to-face conference condition. A schematic representation of the three conference modes is given in figure 2.

Experimental Design

To study the mediated effects on group communication behaviour, a number of six person conferences or meetings were held in each of the three communication modes. A conference consisted of three 45 minute sessions on three consecutive weeks. With the exception of replacements for attrition over the three week period, the same six people met for the three weeks on the same communication mode i.e., if a group held their first session on the video mode, they held all sessions on the video mode. In all, data is

Figure 2: CONFERENCE MODES



available from twelve conferences, four per mode, with three sessions per conference or a total of 36 fourty-five minute conference sessions. The basic experimental design is 3 (communication modes) by 3 (session) repeated measures by 4 replications (Figure 3).

Conferees and Organizational Setting

Conferees were drawn from a population of some 650 university students enrolled in a course in Human Communication at Carleton University. Students attend one two-hour lecture per week and also are members of one of more than thirty tutorial project groups that meets for a minimum of two hours per week. The greatest proportion of their grade is determined by their performance in their small twenty person group. There are a variety of projects undertaken in the groups and the conference was introduced as a project rather than an experiment. Although tutorial groups were chosen at random for the field experiment, all members of a sampled tuturial group participated in one conference over one of the communication modes. In other words, conferees did not volunteer but took part in the conference sessions as part of their program.

The assignment of conferees to communication modes requires some explanation. A six person conference was comprised of three people from one tutorial group and three people from another tutorial group. Since the tutorial groups had, by the time of the study, been together for half of the school year, each conference was made up of two three person subgroups -- prior familiarity existed within subgroups but not between subgroups except by chance, in each conference. Further, in the audio and the video communication modes, the three people from the same tutorial subgroup were together at the same mode. In the face-to-face condition, seating was not experimentally designated, although the three people who knew each other prior to the

Mode	Replications	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	
Face-to-face	Conference 1 (n=6)	N=4 n=24			N=12 n=72
	Conference 2 (n=6)				
	Conference 3 (")				
	Conference 4 (")				
Mediated: Audio/visual Interactive + Graphic visual	Conference 5 (")				N=12 n=72
	Conference 6 (")				
	Conference 7 (")				
	Conference 8 (")				
Mediated Audio + Graphic Visual	Conference 9 (")				N=12 n=72
	Conference 10 (")				
	Conference 11 (")				
	Conference 12 (")				
N=groups n=people		N=12 n=72	N=12 n=72	N=12 n=72	N=36 n=216

Figure 3. Experimental Design

first session, tended all to sit on the same side of the table, particularly at the first meeting. Although tutorial subgroups were randomly assigned to communication modes, the decision to keep together people who already knew each other was based upon the assumption that this arrangement most closely approximates the situation in most actual teleconferences. It is reasonable to assume that those at a given node in the system will know each other better than they know those at a physically distant node.

The Conference Task

A number of criteria were established for selecting the task to be undertaken by the conferees in the experimental sessions.

(1) Generalizability -- We wanted the task, or reason for having the 'conference' to take the form or structure of an activity that would reasonably approximate a non-experimental conference situation.

(2) Credibility -- Since this is a field experiment, the task had to be one that the conferees could normally expect to be part of their work program. Our aim was to de-emphasize the experimental aspects of the activity to the participants by having them engage in a very "plausible" task.

(3) Complexity -- There are a number of reasons why we felt that the task should be complex rather than relatively simple.

(a) Many reasons for holding teleconferences will involve complex rather than simple issues. Regardless of whether the 'purpose' for the meeting is 'negociation', problem solving, policy planning, etc., it is likely that the issues involved will be multi-dimensional and actions resulting from such meetings will not usually be unequivocally "correct".

(b) A simple task, because it would be atypical of 'normal' human deliberations, would likely so contaminate other latent and manifest effects of the teleconferencing situation to limit generalizability beyond the specific experimental situation. (c) A major concern of this research is with peoples' adjustment to mediating communication technologies. Presumably any adjustments that take place will take a period of time. For this reason conferees will hold a number of conference sessions, over the same configuration, to maximize the likelihood of detecting any adjustments they make. The task, then, has to be sufficiently complex to justify multiple conferencing sessions.

(4) Importance and Salience -- This is not a separate criterion but rather an antecedent condition for satisfying the conditions of generalizability, credibility and complexity of the conference activity.

Considering the population from which conferees where drawn, in conjunction with the preceding criteria, one task or activity seemed most satisfactory. Conferees in all experimental groups were required to prepare a series of specific recommendations for actions to be taken to change or improve the Human Communication Course at Carleton. They were instructed to make recommendations on all aspects of the course they felt required change and/or improvement.

Data Collection

As mentioned previously, the study is exploratory and being exploratory we wanted to acquire as comprehensive a data base as was possible, in order to eventually develop a fairly complete picture of mediated group interaction. The existing data bank consists of three separate types of data: (1) self reported perceptions of the conferees, gathered through a

series of four pre and post session structured questionnaires, (2) speaker and time identified verbatum transcripts of the 36 sessions, and (3) split-screen videotape recordings of the 36 sessions.

The self report instruments yielded data concerning individual attitudes towards the other conferees, the conference itself, the technology (in the mediated modes), and perceptions of the conference recommendations and the extent to which the individual personally agreed with the recommendations. This technique of gathering data is fairly standard in communication research but, while self reports are useful, they often have fairly low interpretive value, when taken alone.

The verbal transcripts are a faithful presentation of what was said in the meetings. There are somewhere in the neighbourhood of a thousand closely typed pages. These will be put on cards for computer analyses of a variety of catagory schemes compatible with the General Inquirer content analyses programs.

The split screen videotape data is presently recorded on 3/4" black and white video cassette and will be used for analyses of nonverbal behaviour.

Findings

It is usual at this point to report the research findings. Unfortunately, the data has just nicely been collected and analyses has barely begun. While some preliminary analyses of the self reported data has been undertaken, it would be perhaps misleading to report apparent differences when the analyses are so incomplete. Content analyses of the transcripts and nonverbal analyses of the videotapes will not begin until the summer.

The purpose of the second part of the paper was to report the progress of the study, rather than to present findings. The rather lengthy

description of the experimental procedures was to sufficiently familiarize participants at this convention with the study, so that they could, if they wished, make use of all or any part of the available data pool.

An Invitation

Because data on mediated group interaction was virtually non existent, the effort and expense involved in developing an extensive data bank was warranted. Fortunately, the Engineering Department at Carleton University had already developed prototypes of teleconferencing systems that were sufficiently flexible to be modified for this study. Such facilities are not generally easily accessible, even for those wishing to explore mediated group interaction. Also, transcribing twenty-five hours of the verbal interaction of six people, from videotape, is an onerous and expensive undertaking (a one page example of the verbal interaction in each of the three communication modes is provided at the end of this paper). Since this rich data base, both verbal and nonverbal, is largely uncontaminated by the whims of the experimenters, it should be useful to many researchers to code and analyse according to their own research preoccupations.

The data bank will be shared with those wishing all or any part of it. Raw data decks, the research instruments, codebooks, and complete transcripts are available on request. Also, it should be possible to make some arrangements about the videotape data for anyone wishing to use these for nonverbal research.

FACE WEEK THREE GROUP FOUR

Conferee Code:

1-097 2-096 3-101
4-102 5-093 6-094

Everyone talking.

5 We had this one guy in there one night - you know the Napean Sports Plex - he came out the Napon Sport Plex and everybody said "Jesus Christ, what is that" you know.

4 Laughing.

5 You just wouldn't believe this guy.. he was too much. He just read... like he read the first two words of the line and then make up the rest - literally - he just had a terrific imagination, you know.

4 Mmmm.

5 Tony was in there making duck noises and the poor guy cracks up half way through the news cast and starts laughing and...

4 Is that right?

5 He says "Quack, quack, quack, quack."

2 Do youse have to go on radio, or..?

5 You don't have to read the news if you don't want to, but you have to....

3 Sometimes you don't have to read the news if you don't want to, but other times...

5 Right..... you have to read it if you don't want to but you have to read it five hours a week of um, whatever it is that we call it.

4 and 6 talking

4 How many ..... did you have in five hours?

5 I don't know.

4 A couple?

5 It all depends, sometimes ... some nights if I didn't like the editor I wouldn't even stay or do anything.

4 Is that right? Cause....

5 And other nights you'd take the whole news cast single handed, you know, it all depended what was going on.

4 Uh-huh.

3 Yeh, I remember the 8:00 news.

5 Yeh, the 3:00 news; 6:30's look at the weather formula - big deal.

4 Mumble.

5 What happened last week?

6 The same thing that happened the week before.

1 Yeh, just the same as the week before.

5 Gosh.

4 Mumbles.

6 This week they say to talk about our recommendations?

5 Why? (Reading from booklet) Have you certain concerns. Reads. ..... Oh I see - well what were our recommendations?

6 Well one of them was that groups should be communication class and not just come in here and sit down... like this is a communication class and they'd like you to communicate in the group.

4 Well that's what we are doing.

5 We did that.

4 and 5 talking.

6 Not our group. I don't know....

4 A lot of it is up to the TA, don't you thing?

6 Right.. but our....

5 He shouldn't really do so much though.

6 Our group's... our group leader is in charge and he is sort of controlling everything. The group never takes off on its own.

5 You mean you have too much direction, maybe? Oh, Heather's such an authority for us.

4 Isn't she.

VIDEO WEEK 1 GROUP 4

Conferee Code:

1-015	2-016	3-017
4-018	5-019	6-020

(everyone talking at once)

2 Oh I feel funny man. C..B.C. Television I'm right here. Are we supposed to write our names on here?....

3 Which one's Robin Harris.

6 That's Robin.

3 Hi Robin.

2 HI Dad. O wow!

4 Write your names down on that pad. See that camera right above you? - it's right down there.. that...

1 ..... (unclear) braz a o

4 Watch it now - don't try and move my name ..... picture - that's what I did ...

(laughter)

2 .. see them right side up - how about that. Hey why don't you guys let the chairman over there do some of that

5 Chair person.

Ahh, liberalism.

4 Yeah - think we're going to be here and I .

5 No

4 Yes, and Cheryl your're the Chairwoman

5 Chairperson.

(everyone talking at once)

2 So, is somebody going to start?

6 We supposed to start already?

1 Is there an agenda?

5 Let's read the thing first.

(everyone talking)

2 This is Lloyd Robertson - goodnight!

4 You've been watching too much television.

2 Maybe if someone pops a question, you know, we can .- let me see, what are we supposed to do here. The group is asked to determine the aspects of the course that you feel could benefit by being changed.

3 Well what's wrong with the course.

2 Yeah. I don't mind sleeping in class.

5 This is funny, talking to pictures.

6 What?

5 This is funny, talking to pictures.

4 Well I had the feeling during last term - we did an a.v. project, which really took us a long time, it was film.- and I think everyone else in our group - groups - had that problem, and the creative writing turned out to be just a last minute effort. Umm, and it could happen this term too, with one of the projects or other, you're going to spend more time So I would suggest there should be only two projects a year. One a term - and you'd have a choice of four, like - so that you could have a.v., creative writing, graphics and log.

1 Nobody would do the log.

4 Well thats the chances you take - I mean what - I mean the idea of the course to me anyway is to try and explore things, and I think that you can - I mean why slough off something, which so many people did re the creative writing anyway. I don't know which end of the course you guys were at. Whether you - have you done your a.v. yet?

AUDIO WEEK 1 GROUP 4

Conferee code:
1-063 2-064 3-065
4-066 5-067 6-068

5 Discussing things...

1 Oh

5 ... abouy the course.

5 Well we got the right people didn't we Marg.

1 Oh dear yes. Well, I think everybody know what everyone else thinks.

6 Not really, no. There's different of comparison really.

1 Well, who wants to start?

3 What's..... (unclear)

6 Well you were talking about the workshops before.

1 Well I've never been to one so I can't really talk about them.

6 Yeah, you were talking about how the times aren't arranged at the right - like a lot of the times are inconvenient. to go to them, so they miss out.

1 Well probably any time you're going to - fix is going to be inconvenient for somebody.

3 Yeah.

5 Yeah, but you work Marg so that's, you know..

1 Oh, but I work Friday night, Saturday night and Sundary nigh, you know, so how many workshops on those nights.

2 Oh.

5 Yeah, but what's stopping you from going Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night, Thursday night?

1 Tuesday and Thursday I've got classes.

5 Oh. Well Monday and Wednesday they've got really good - they've got, you know, film workshop on Mondays. Wednesday is graphics I think - no graphics is Tuesday. Photography and cinetics and all that, you could go to those.

1 Yeah, I suppose.

5 Well there goes your complete....

1 I wasn't complaining....

5 Oh.

1 ... take it easy!

5 I'm not getting it.

4 Yeah, I've heard that before. Other people have said that to me that they wished....

1 I can't hear you very well.

4 That they wished the workshops were during the day rather then night, so they could go to some of them.

1 Yeah, it would probably be better. Especially for kids who live off campus too

6 Yeah.

5 Well, what about the nature of the course as a complaint - like...

1 Oh, you want us here all year?

6 Yeah.

5 Oh, I mean, it's so indefinite. Nothing is really - there are no goals as such that have been set out for the course, so really anything goes.

1 Yeah, I know, I've been chastised because I misinterpreted the thing human communications as opposed to Journalism, but...

5 Yes.

1 ... I think nevertheless, whether I interpreted it wrong or not, we're still getting ripped-off, because we go into second year, where supposedly you have an awful lot of things to do.

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