

Passive and active mediation: can conciliation inform CMC research?

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There is a body of evidence to suggest that CMC has a distorting effect on the social information used in creating and maintaining relationships. Existing research has tended to identify variables for analysis and used these to infer a general effect of CMC on the majority of relationships. Given the complexity of human interaction, a more relationship-specific approach to the identification of salient variables may be desirable. Conciliation is one such approach: a conciliator must isolate salient factors of a relationship and distort these to transform the relationship that exists between parties. This paper proposes the exploration of the relationship between 'active' (human) mediation and 'passive' (technological) mediation, as a way of informing CMC research. A Model of Relational Communication is proposed, which enables the scope of existing theories of mediation to be evaluated and allows active and passive mediation to be discussed in similar terms. Provisional pilot results indicate that passive mediation impacts on active mediation, and imply that a study of conciliation may inform research into CMC.

Keywords: CMC; Conflict; Conciliation

Introduction

Increasing Internet-support for images, video, text and telephony, mean that there are few forms of relationship that cannot be computer-mediated. However, computer-mediation may distort social information to such a degree that relationships are transformed. Existing Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) research has attempted to identify factors of communication (e.g. trust [1], affinity [2], identity cues [3], warmth [4], etc.) that can be used as variables for measuring the impact of communication technology on relationships. The cumulative findings of this research, suggest that CMC impacts differently on relationships than Face-to-Face (FtF) communication. However, the measurement variables, identified in these studies, may differ in salience between participants, or change with time. Therefore, the *a priori* selection of variables may fail to appropriately recognise, or fully consider, the salience of other social information present in any given relationship. To fully understand the impact of mediation on relationships, a method for establishing the unique, salient factors of communication within a relationship, must be developed.

Such a method already exists within the field of Alternative Dispute Resolution: conciliation. Third-party conciliation is used to mediate communication between parties in conflict. The conciliator seeks to transform the relationship to one of co-operation[5][6][7]. Social information passed between parties, is distorted in a reflexive manner: the conciliator recognises, analyses and controls the effect they have on social information. Thus conciliation is a form of *active mediation* (AM). This contrasts with the role of technology in CMC. Here, technology distorts social information without reference to context (although parties may consider context when interpreting distorted social information). The technology is not aware of, and therefore cannot control, its effect on the relationship. Thus it is a form of *passive mediation* (PM).

This research attempts to use this distinction between AM and PM to elicit the role of mediation in transforming relationships through the distortion of social information. Investigation of PM will highlight the distorting effect that technological mediation has on social information. Investigation of AM will provide insight as to how salient factors of a relationship can be successfully identified and distorted. An examination of AM conducted using PM, will demonstrate the effect that technology has on salient variables, indicating the effect of CMC on relationships.

Methodology

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. Ecological validity is highly salient when investigating conflict relationships. However, the practical and ethical considerations of requesting parties to participate in computer-mediated conciliation makes large-scale, 'real-world' data collection unfeasible. Therefore the majority of data will be collected by analysing conflict, engineered under laboratory conditions. Four conditions will be investigated: no-mediation; PM; AM; and AM-PM. However, interim findings will be regularly validated through interviews with, and observations of, conciliation professionals. It is hoped that this will mitigate any negative effects incurred by sacrificing ecological validity for experimental reliability

Current Findings

Primarily this study has focussed on establishing the degree to which AM and PM can be discussed in the same terms. This has been undertaken largely through a literature review, resulting in the development of a Model of Relational Communication (MoRC). This MoRC allows both AM and PM to be discussed in the same terms. Therefore, the scope of existing theories of mediation (both passive and active) can be evaluated with this model.

The Model of Relational Communication

To be able to successfully communicate, parties need to be present at compatible levels of abstraction [8]. Once this is established, present discursive schemas (e.g. shared history, environment, language, technology) will promote certain expectations of behaviour, shaping the way each party is observed by the other [9]. Parties will interpret their observations of the other in terms of the relationship-salient narratives they hold [10][11]. Any form of mediation may unexpectedly distort social information, potentially leading to misunderstanding, or misattribution of meaning. With passive mediation this may be an unintended side-effect of technology-use. With active mediation, this distortion of expectations may be the purpose of the mediation.

Experimental Findings

Pilot experimental results (from conciliated role-plays) suggest that the introduction of CMC (specifically VMC) into the ADR process has an effect on the conciliator's methodology and parties' behaviours. Parties report that VMC promotes feelings of distance and detachment from the interaction, which helps to 'cool down' the negotiations. Conciliators using VMC reported feeling more of a 'passive observer', necessitating different control and information gathering strategies.

Conclusion

The MoRC suggests that AM and PM share consistencies, that allow them to be investigated in similar terms. Tentative experimental results demonstrate that AM is affected, to a degree, by PM. Therefore, future research intends to focus on those elements of the conciliator's strategy that are adjusted to accommodate the introduction of technology into their practice. The reasons for, and result of, these adjustments should provide a useful and unique insight into the effect of CMC on relationship development, maintenance and transformation.

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