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February 13, 2005

cultural divide in IM: presence vs. communication

To most of my friends, i appear always-on. If i'm not on the computer, my IMs usually go to my Sidekick. I have a round-the-clock presence on AIM, even if frequently idle. I share this round-the-clockness with some of my buddies - people who always appear to be on, although sometimes idle. There are other buddies who pop up whenever they're on their computer (often 9-5). Then, there are those who pop up very occasionally.

The thing about members of this latter category is that they *always* want to talk when they come online. This makes sense - they're appearing online only to talk, not to share presence. They are seeing IM as a communication tool first and foremost.

Interestingly, it is this group that complains the most about how they can never get anything done when IM is on. I try really hard not to respond in a snarky voice that i can never get anything done when they're on. They get upset when i don't have time to talk, arguing that i shouldn't be online if i don't want to talk.

There is, in fact, a culture divide in instant messaging.

As someone who is always on, i spend a small fraction of the day using IM. It is always on because of presence. There are types of 'interruptions' that are not actually interruptions. For example, when my roommate wants to ask when i'll be home or when a friend wants to know a reference. Quick, practical questions that are far more like presence pokes than interruptions. Then, there are acceptable interruptions - things like work questions, emergencies, pointers to relevant info, etc. And then, there's conversation.

I don't spend a lot of time conversing on IM, very little in fact. I simply do not have time. But, i am 10 million times more likely to converse with someone who is always-on than someone who just pops up for conversation. The reason is simple - collective signaling of conversational possibility. As an always-on'r, when someone pokes me to talk and i don't have time, i say sorry - can't talk or some equivalent (except in the case of my phone which might appear to be on while i'm doing something but isn't really). I expect the same from my fellow always-on'rs. So, when i'm in the mood to talk to people and they're in the mood to talk to me (or we're equally procrastinating), we come to a consensus and conversation happens.

Now, let's go back to the people who come online just to talk. The problem with this group is that they're unintentionally exerting power. They are declaring their free time by logging on and they're assuming that i am signaling the same thing. But i'm not. This is simply cultural cluelessness. But when they then get upset with me, that's the exertion of power. And this is what has prompted me to change IM accounts or block people in the past. Now, i'm just rude.

Consider the telephone. When your phone rings, are you required to pick it up? At first, everyone assumed you were. Eventually, we learned that the phone doesn't have to have that kind of power over us. And many of us now screen and only pick up the phone when it is applicable to the situation we're in. (Of course, some of us still need to learn that.) The caller is signaling their free time, but the receiver gets to decide if it's culturally appropriate. And thus, they are actually doing the negotiating dance of us always-on'rs.

The problem with IM is that the always-on'rs have gotten far more comfortable with the technology than those who still see it as a communication tool, not just a desirable presence tool. The cultural divide is very much magnified by experience and time spent engaged in the technology. Of course, the split happens around those who recognize the value of presence and want to do what it takes culturally to retain that.

Update: Since Liz called me on bits of this entry, i should clarify a key assumption i was making in presenting this argument - i am talking very explicitly about people with relatively equal standing in terms of power (i.e. peers). While all "equal" relationships are about negotiating power back and forth, the technology consistently gives one person in the peer-duo power over the other - that's where the problem is primarily situated. With unequal power pairings, the problem is exacerbated because there's an assumption of equal power standing in IM that is not actually true to form. For example, as a TA in college, i would have students who thought they could bug me anytime they had a problem with their assignment. This happened because it was assumed that there was equal power between IM participants and so the negotiation of power got usurped by the technology because the context got cleansed. In other words, all IM windows look the same and so you forget about the context that would normally differentiate situations of equal footing (such as the bar) and situations of differentiated footing (such as the TA office).

Posted by zephoria at February 13, 2005 06:54 PM | **TrackBack**

Comments

Lemme guess, did you just have or almost have a spat with a communicator? I was going to write about this today when I was chatting with a friend on IM whom I've had little fights with about talking on IM. Even though I've been using IM for many years it's hard for me to shake my communication-only ways. I think it may come from the fact that I used dialup when my friend had cable internet. I would treat chatting on IM exactly like I was making a phone call. She would tell me she'd be right back and then come back an hour later. At the time, to me, this was an insult because I was tying up my phone line waiting for her.

Even after getting cable I still expected people who were online to want to talk, be available to talk, and talk back if they could. If they couldn't talk they a) should get offline or b) put up an away message. Those were my rules, but it seemed like every different friend had their own set of rules.

Now, I just try to bend to fit everybody else's practices. I don't go online if I don't want to talk or can't talk. One friend may be away for 3 hours, another may never go away and want to talk the entire 20 minutes she's online. Either way, it's about me catering to their style and not getting upset about it.

It will take some time before everybody's on the same page because the technology's so new. Maybe people should write what their chatting style is in their profile instead of the lyrics to their favorite song.

Posted by: **Jessica** at February 13, 2005 08:31 PM

Actually, not a spat, but close. A good friend got online for the first time in forever, a sociologist friend and he really wanted to talk and i needed to read. And i called him on exerting power in his techno-avoidance ways. And then i decided to think through that deeper and think back to previous interactions.

Part of what makes away msgs impossible - 1) they don't exist on the sidekick (more accurately, they're preconfigured and too lame for words and i refuse to use them); 2) i'm not actually away and if we're working together, i don't want to confuse you. I'm only away for *certain* kinds of interactions.

And yes, learning, that's the key. And most of my friends have learned... but those who are rarely online haven't learned as much. ::laugh::

Actually, there's another problem group - those who are rarely online, send an IM and then go offline before i see it and are never back online and i never end up knowing to connect with them.

Posted by: **zephoria** at February 13, 2005 08:42 PM

There's a way of making IM presence much more subtle and frankly human in character -- I'm smiling as I remember all manner of cross-library conversations-by-glances -- and it's a only a matter of time before it happens. (Matt Webb's ideas about **'glancing'** -- ways of indicating heightened presence without the binary of IM communication -- are right up your street here.)

I've gone from being always-on to a 'never on unless I need to be' IMer, partly because it got to the point that 98% of IM conversations were interruptions. I've grown more accustomed, and more appreciative, of the deferred presence of email, especially now that I do have an always-on connection.

One last thought: IM is quite an *adolescent* form of communication, isn't it? Or, at least, it lends itself to the kind of communications that you associate with adolescence: ones that have implicit power relationships, demands, elements of duty...

Posted by: **nick** at February 14, 2005 01:40 AM

I'm a one of those always-on persons and most of my friends are also, especially those who I have meet from various travels. I wish telephone had an "always-on" culture, because currently I have screen calls due to long disruptive conversations.

What just occurred to me is that the always-on culture is resembles the emerging IT systems architecture for the 21st. The asynchronous communication nature of the always-on culture, with negotiated extended communication, can lead to greater scale of association. IT systems designed with presence technology utlizing asynchronous communication technology lead to greater system scaling which means more systems can interact and exchange information.

Without an always-on presence culture, as in the synchronous era of telephone only communication, we screen calls and in the case of an IT system built with synchronous technology the system is designed to prioritize communications links otherwise it is inundated and breaks down.

Posted by: **Terry** at February 14, 2005 06:32 AM

I was on a panel in Tel Aviv recently and Yossi Vardi said the most important information when he is traveling is that his phone is on and it is not ringing. That means his family is safe. That's, depending on how you count it, 1 bit or 0 bits of information.

Posted by: **Joi Ito** at February 14, 2005 07:02 AM

My friend **Jofish** just published a paper titled **Communicating Intimacy One Bit at a Time**, where he and his collaborators gave partners in a long distance relationship a piece of software that would light up a software LED on one partner's screen when the other partner clicked a button. The LED's brightness would slowly decay with time, indicating presence.

Perhaps a similar scheme could be implemented for IM, with different colors representing active communication versus presence, with a quick fade from active to passive. Idle time serves a similar purpose, but is perhaps ignored or unseen. Perhaps it's just a matter of making idle time visible and contextual through color to help alert relative IM newbies to social appropriateness.

Posted by: **Eric Nehrlich** at February 14, 2005 07:30 AM

I have two IM accounts which I use for different things. I'm required to be logged into my ICQ account during work hours so that people can message me if they need to. This has generally soured me on instant messaging, particularly since I had a coworker who used to IM me to tell me that she just sent me an email, and then would IM me again a few minutes later if I hadn't responded to her first IM by then.

The other is my AIM account which I use for more 'social' stuff. I have pretty mixed feelings about IM so I don't usually leave it up, although this is subject to a certain amount of variation ... I've been leaving it up more recently lately.

I think that the two things I dislike about IM are:

* When I get a message I feel a certain amount of pressure to respond within a few minutes, even if I'm busy dealing with something else. Conversely if I don't respond quickly and when I finally head over to

AIM and find that the person who messaged me has logged off I feel bad.

* I haven't figured out yet how the social dynamics work -- when it's OK to message people, how to gracefully end a conversation when both of you are still probably going to be logged in for a while but have exhausted the topic you were discussing, etc.

I think one of the reasons I tend not to initiate too many IM conversations is related to (1) -- I'm worried that I'll be messaging someone at a time not convenient for them and that this will affect them the way it affects me when someone does it to me.

The strange thing is that I also spend most of my day logged into a MOO where, you would think, the same sorts of issues would be present, but I don't get freaked out by the dynamics in the same way. In part I think it's because of the fact that there are a bunch of people around, so the overall conversation can continue while I jump in and out of it as I have time. (But I also think work probably has contributed to my less than positive assessment of IM.)

Posted by: **Jacob Haller** at February 14, 2005 01:34 PM

Away messages on the Sidekick actually are customizable. Instead of picking a canned one like "Unavailable", just pick the first one, "I'm Away", and type in the message you want.

But I do agree that Away is too strong for a lot of contexts. I'm a huge believer in the non-Away status message: it lets you communicate about what you're doing without putting up such a big barrier, so people can make appropriate decisions. Some of my status messages, like "Debugging something" or "Scratching my head", connote an unwillingness to be disturbed, while others like "minty-fresh" are more inviting.

I implemented status messages very early on in iChat, and we were fortunate enough to be able to talk the AIM people at AOL into adding official support for them to the Oscar protocol. But I have the feeling that a lot of IM clients still don't support them.

Posted by: **Jens** at February 14, 2005 03:03 PM

I have the same exact problem. I also have similar problems in all other forms of communication, in which in one way or another, people get upset when they can't command attention in whatever medium. I have people who get incensed that I don't pick up the phone when they know I'm home. I have people who assume that, because I'm self-employed, it means "must be home and available anytime for whatever reason, especially if it's technical." I have people who email and then email again to ask why I haven't returned their email, and who say "you are supposed to be the tech guru, how come you can't return a simple email??"

There is something peculiar about the nature of IM that creates its own particular set of problems, but I think there is a wider gulf in which IM is but one of many casualties... there is surely a digital divide between those who have and use easy access to the internet and those who don't have any access to computers whatsoever. But I see another divide emerging between those who "use Google every once in a while" and those who keep 6 browsers running all the time. Even with some intense signal/noise filters in my setup, there is far more information coming in than I can possibly deal with. And it's very difficult to explain to people why I can't manage their "simple 1 minute request" - it's not that the request itself is unreasonable, it's that there are a 1000 such "little requests" sitting in my inbox from this week alone. Which is all on top of the mandatory stuff that has to get done in the course of work/life.

I think the presence/non-presence idea can be extrapolated beyond IM, because I feel a gulf between myself and my friends who are "non-presence," and that that gulf is growing. I don't know how much of that is exacerbated by my already prone-to-antisocialness and how much is a byproduct of some more universal effect. :)

Posted by: **barb dybwad** at February 14, 2005 03:24 PM

One other thing that you don't quite touch on, but that I am noticing now that you have me thinking about

it:

I have a friend who is a a communicator. She comes on to talk, and the moment there is no more talking, she leaves. I cannot tell if perhaps I am the /only/ person on her list, but maybe I am. The thing is, if I walk away for a minute, or even a couple of minutes, she will get upset and leave. (Ironically, she also complains whenever I type long messages - she calls them small novels - she wants me to think and respond, but not too much, but I digress.)

The always-on'rs, however, seem perfectly content to do a few things:

1.) Send a message with no expectation of an immediate answer. Whether to an Away message, Idle status, or even if I am there.

2.) Allow a 'conversation' to last for hours with messages interspersed in several minute intervals.

3.) Allow a 'conversation' to fade out and die with no negative repercussions for not saying goodbye or 'wrapping up' the conversation.

The always on'rs understand, as you say, that I have a life. I have never considered it in the way that you present it, but this is an issue of presence. I am available to people, but those of us who are always on understand that we have no monopoly on anyone else's time. In this way I can carry on conversations with 5 people at a time and do other things, because time can elapse and no feelings are hurt, no one screams for my attention (unless, perhaps, we are clearly involved in a rolling exchange), and I can finish tasks before responding to someone.

It is for this reason that I almost always work out and chat at the same time (computer and weights are in the same room). But I get one of those random signers on and I have to be attentive and lively and intelligent.

It's rather analagous to hanging out with one's best friend, sitting around watching television, and taking someone on a date. One implies comfort and companionship, the other an attentive exchange of information.

Ben

Posted by: **Ben** at February 14, 2005 06:13 PM

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i like when the boundaries between categories loosen up and even dissolve.

friend of mine and his boss are always on'rs. they don't have to reply to e.o.'s IM's. they don't have to say goodbye when they drift off, sign off, or suspend. they're cool like that. but, of course, they also have to continually negotiate the power asymmetry intrinsic to their relationship, even over IM. so amidst that background, one late night they found themselves in a chat over a technical matter that evolved away from its initial subject and became a good natured camaraderie and even, after a while, a sort of friendly bonding. and finally the boss said something like, well, it's kinda late, i'd better hit the sack, to which my friend said something like, yeah, me, too, sleep well. and really, these are lines they never would have normally said to each other as always on'rs or as super- and subordinate.

in the hazy midnight, the normal power relationship gives way to a moment of friendship and the cool etiquette of the always-on'r makes way for a poignant acknowledgement of the same.

Posted by: **scott** at February 14, 2005 09:47 PM

It occured to me that we've developed ways to deal with interruptions such as knocks and telephone rings, in order to distinguish between different people. There's the rhythmic knock that's a signature for a particular person; or the caller who, having been instructed in advance, lets the phone ring once, then hangs up, either to call again straight away or be called back later. (A favourite for kids at college who don't want to pay the phone bill.)

Posted by: **nick** at February 15, 2005 02:24 AM

As someone who used ICQ when it first came out, dropped it because of how much time it occupied, but has recently been thinking of using IM again, this has been an instructive discussion.

A potential addition to Glancing would be the ability to see an individual's busyness stats, like number of unanswered emails from the last three days, whether an activity requiring app (word processor for instance) is open, etc. This would happen as part of a group glance, ie. you drop down the menu thereby glancing at everyone and then mouse over a particular person and their stats pop-up. The eye on the machine of someone you glanced at individually should get a little larger, or maybe stay open a little longer, than everyone else's.

This individually increased attention would allow for subtle individual interactions to take place within the social context.

Separately, I'd really like an app that measure ambient noise with a mic and adjusted music volume accordingly. I work in an open concept office, where we all face the outside walls. I want to listen to music, but not disturb others. But if I get headphones, then I block myself off from the quick "Hey, what's the name of that dongle in the wiffle file?" questions that come up.

Posted by: **Yaacov** at February 15, 2005 09:26 AM

This is a very curious discussion to me. I would love to know the age of most of the people doing the postings. I am in my mid-20's, and as a result, I have been on AIM regularly since high school.

This seems like a bit of a non-issue. Clearly, there are people who like to talk more, but the longer people have AIM (for instance from high school to college, graduate school and finally a job), the better able they are to understand and regulate boundaries. You as the one with the "presence" simply needs to make your boundaries known openly.

For instance, most of us by now KNOW not to just leave a crazy message w/o initiating a "hello" lest we leave an embarassing message for a boss or co-worker to discover. Second, if you as the one with "presence" want more space, you should use your away message function. For more saavy users, this is a FUNCTION, not a literal "I am away from my computer" message. For instance, many of my friends will leave 2 types of messages on their AIM. The first is a general profile. This can be, for instance, an explanation of your thoughts on AIM or more commonly something funny. Then there are away messages. Keep in mind that away messages are VITAL to maintaining presence on AIM. I know VERY FEW who use the stock AIM away message. You put up a personal one FREQUENTLY (every time you change what you're doing & what people to know it). If you just don't want to be bothered by a long conversation, you can either write something cute (like trying to do X) or something very serious (concentrating on X, please IM only for quick chats). I have seen both. Furthermore, it allows your friends to know where you are both physically (i.e. not ignoring me or physically away from computer) and emotionally (not able to give me attention right now but still thinks I'm an ok person). If you put up an away message that says only IM if X,Y,or Z, and someone IM's to ask what you think of Brad and Jennifer's breakup, you have EVERY RIGHT to ignore it. If you are busy/working/not chatting, etc, the away message gives them that update. Then you can use the profile to give more information about yourself and make MORE of a presence...get it? If you REALLY need some alone time, but like to keep the presence on your computer (I do), you can also do the "hide" feature (which is the little eye), and no one can see you unless you IM them first.

So, when I'm on AIM, I rarely if ever openly chat with people. I will use it as a way to initiate quick conversations, arrange for meetings or do QUICK hello's (like we're talking fast). I do, however, every once in a while during the day take a minute to glance at people's away messages and profiles. If someone's away message just screams, "hey - ask me about this," I will. For instance, I got this blog off of someone's profile.

So the analogy to the phone and to personal conversation is just WRONG. AIM is a thing that is unique to itself. Remember that. You DON'T need to have these awkward conversations.

Posted by: **Heather** at February 15, 2005 09:41 AM

I am also mid-20's and have also been using AIM since high school. This "understanding" you speak of simply doesn't exist for me, especially with people ranging from 13 to 60 on my list. They all view boundaries differently, most use away messages incorrectly (as does Heather, apparently, though because AIM forces you to). Most of the young people put song lyrics as their messages. Many people never come online, though they talk a lot. The older (or young stupid) people either walk away and let their connection idle, or are running software that never idles, yet gives me a message saying they forgot to put up an away message when I IM them.

Posted by: **Neil** at February 15, 2005 12:37 PM

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