

Subtle ice-breaking: encouraging socializing and interaction around a large public display

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ABSTRACT

Our research is concerned with how groups of people move and socialize around large public displays, the way they move towards them, congregate around them and change from being onlookers to interactors and back again. We describe a system – Opinionizer – we built and placed in a real-life social gathering, intended to encourage socializing and interaction. The goal was to provide a shared virtual space which people could add their opinions to, which over time would result in the creation of a collective trace of social commentary, that in turn could provide a stimulus to initiate conversations between people in the same physical space. When first trialled at a book launch party, where several hundreds of people (many who did not know each other) gathered and milled around in the same physical space, a ‘honey-pot effect’ was observed. This was essentially the drawing in of people to the area around Opinionizer and the creation of a buzz around it. We describe this phenomenon in terms of a social affordance, that suggests it is socially acceptable for those who have moved into the honey-pot ‘zone’ to spark up a conversation with their neighbours. Our paper describes how we designed the Opinionizer and the patterns of physical, virtual and social engagement that took place around it.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever found yourself at a party, wedding, conference or other social gathering, standing awkwardly by yourself, not knowing who to talk to or what to talk about? Social embarrassment and self consciousness affect most of us at such moments and is most acute when one is a newcomer and by oneself, such as a first time attendee at a conference. How might we help overcome these social impasses and make conversation initiation easier and less awkward among people who do not know each other?

A number of social mechanisms have been employed by organizers of social events, such as asking old-timers to act as mentors and the holding of various kinds of ice-breaking activities [e.g. 3]. Badge wearing, the plying of alcohol and food and introductions by others are also common ploys. While many of these methods can help, engaging in ice-breaking activities can be somewhat ‘heavy-weight’, in the sense of requiring people to act in a way that is different to the way they normally socialize and which they find uncomfortable or painful to do. They often require people to agree to join in a collaborative game which they find cringe-making and highly embarrassing. This can be exacerbated by the fact that once someone has agreed to take part, it is then difficult for them to drop out, because of the perceived consequences it will have on the others and themselves (e.g. seen by the others as a spoilsport or party-pooper). Having had one such embarrassing experience, most people will shy away from any further kinds of ice-breaking activities. As an alternative approach, our research is concerned with how we might design more ‘lightweight’ mechanisms that will allow people to enter and exit a conversation with a stranger in more subtle ways, i.e. ones where people do not feel threatened or embarrassed, and which do not require a high level of commitment. In particular, we are interested in how we can use technology to facilitate what people enjoy doing most in social settings – namely, sharing ideas, gossiping, learning about others and talking about oneself – but which they often find awkward to do in an unfamiliar social setting.

So, how might we appropriate technology to encourage people to ‘break the ice’ and talk to each other in ways they feel comfortable with and, importantly, not self conscious? Previous research has explored the use of various computer-based ‘match-making’ techniques, based on algorithms that determine which preferences and views shared among people would make them suitable conversational partners. In some instances, these profiles have then been publically ‘exposed’, via the use of LCD name tags that light up between assumed like-minded people when in close proximity [e.g. 2]. While such explicit revelations of what is normally hidden and discreet can be entertaining for some, for others it can feel very intrusive and a very unnatural way of meeting someone.

Our more lightweight proposal is to consider how we might use a virtual shared space which people can interact with, and which at the same time can provide a stimulus to initiate conversation among people who happen to be standing next to each

other. Hence, it is based on creating a physical/virtual space that increases the chances of people meeting through serendipity and opportunism, which is a more normal and socially accepted way of meeting. In particular, we were interested in providing a public display, that people could add their views and opinions to, which they and others could observe and then add further comments, if they felt so inclined. A key decision, therefore, was that there should be no obligation to take part, but that the space would organize itself in a way that made it socially acceptable to talk to whoever was in that space. The collective building up of the shared content on the electronic board could also provide a talking point, providing a stimulus for people standing besides it to comment on to their neighbour, with little commitment or embarrassment.

We decided to design our virtual interaction space so that it could be projected onto a large wall, inviting people to type in their comments via an adjacent laptop that would then appear on the public display. Previous use of electronic whiteboards have generally been confined to classroom settings and meeting rooms, where teachers and presenters use them to display ideas and concepts to a seated audience. In contrast, our proposed use of a public board in a social gathering was for it to be available to all to observe and interact with. Furthermore, the audience would be milling around it rather than sitting in front of it, allowing them to easily and comfortably switch from being an observer to an active interactor and back again.

A key issue was to consider how we might design a shared display that presented the right kind of content that anyone could observe or add to and which changed sufficiently over time to continue maintaining interest among the people at the social event. Moreover, we wanted to design it so that people could use it as a way of initiating a conversation with the person/s standing besides them, either commenting on the ongoing virtual happenings on the board or discussing what to contribute themselves. Having broken the ice in this way, it could then lead onto further topics of conversations. In contrast with CommunityMirrors [2], which was designed to reflect the ongoing dynamics of a party through using percentage-based visualizations, we designed ours as an interactive display that anyone could add their opinions to, if and when they felt like it, thereby building up more of a visual memory of the opinions of people at the social event.

DESIGNING OPINIONIZER

To inform the content of our public display, we began by exploring various features of what might be suitable using a low fidelity ‘pen and paper’ prototype. In particular, we wanted to determine how and what would encourage people to participate and leave their opinions and comments on a shared board. Aspects we were primarily concerned with, included:

- the importance of providing a theme to structure the interactions
- the physical location of where the display is placed [7]
- the chaining of comments and opinions over time – will people respond to each other’s comments in a physical space as they do in virtual communities, like chatrooms?

A physical whiteboard was placed next to our lab’s coffee machine, which a dozen or so colleagues pass by a few times each day when getting coffee and also to chat. Various materials, including different coloured post-it notes, sticky tape, coloured tip pens, coloured board-markers and an eraser were provided. For the first few days open-ended instructions were posted on the board, encouraging anyone to write whatever they felt like. However, the tabula rasa approach failed to elicit many responses. As an alternative tactic, we posted at the beginning of each day a light-hearted question geared to provoke specific comments (e.g ‘who is supposed to be coffee monitor this week?’). People felt much more comfortable with this and subsequently began adding their comments, notes and other postings.

A main finding, therefore, was that it was not until some comments or specific questions appeared on the board were others provoked into participating themselves. Another finding was that images and jokes proved to be the most successful at eliciting comments from others. There were very few ‘chains’ of comments (i.e. comments added to others); those that did ranged between one and three referenced postings. This was indicated by the placement of the comment underneath the one that was being referenced. The best comments and opinions were considered those that were humorous, and succinct provocative ‘text bites’.

We then set about designing our shared display system, which we called Opinionizer. The aim was to provide a milling audience with a forum to post their opinions and comments about a particular topic. The intention was that it be lighthearted and lightweight, allowing people to easily ‘step in and out’ of the limelight when interacting with the system and for others to be able to comment to each other or the ‘interactor’ with relative ease and, importantly, not to feel embarrassed when doing so. Hence, a primary aim behind the design of Opinionizer was to encourage people in a crowd to participate in a *virtual* social space which would have the effect of allowing others standing around the display to feel comfortable sparking up conversations with each other. Based on our pilot study findings, we designed a set of provocative questions with accompanying eye-catching images that were contextually relevant to the social gathering (see Figure 1 for an example). The questions were designed to appear for a limited time, with a new one appearing every 10 minutes or so, to keep the display ‘fresh’ and also prevent too many opinions from overcrowding the display.

The level of involvement and interaction required to ‘write’ an opinion was kept to a minimum. Participants were asked initially to select a small 2D cartoon avatar, and type in a nickname (optional). Different kinds of avatars were provided for different social gatherings; for example, for an Open University summer school party, pink and blue avatars representing stereotypical gender differences, were provided (deliberately designed like this to provoke a discussion). They were also able

to choose one of three different types of speech bubble to indicate the mood of their opinion (speaking, shouting or thinking). They were then required to type in their opinion. Having done this they had to drag their avatar plus thought bubble onto the screen. The screen was designed as a coloured circle, divided into quartiles, each representing different professions or backgrounds, depending on the type of people at the social gathering, (e.g. ‘techie’, ‘softie’, ‘designer’ and ‘student’ for the book launch at the CHI conference). Here, the idea was to enable people to provide demographic information about themselves, in a subtle way, by simply moving their avatar to an area of the screen. If they did not want to provide the information, they could simply move their avatar outside of the area or near to the center, where the target question/graphic was positioned.

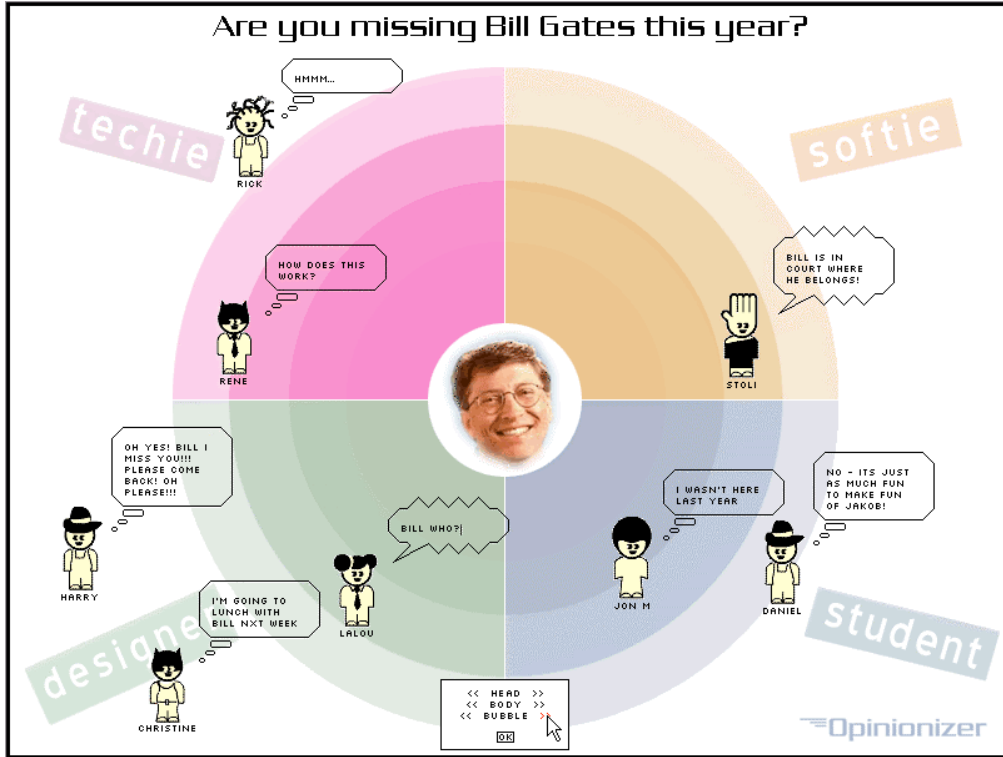


Figure 1: Screenshot from Opinionizer, showing cartoon avatars with different speech bubbles and comments positioned over the various demographic quartiles.

PLACING OPINIONIZER IN A PARTY SETTING

Our first study exploring how people would use Opinionizer in a social setting took place during an evening book launch party at CHI’02 conference. The display was set up in a prominent place (a raised platform next to the bar) in a large circular room (see figure 2). The size of the Opinionizer screen was approximately 6’ wide by 4.5’ tall. The text on the screen was legible from approximately 5 meters away, and was visible to those at the front of the room. The keyboard was positioned on a table close to the display. A helper stood by to explain to people was going on. The party lasted for 2 hours, during which several hundred people milled around the area near the display (usually on their way to and from the bar). Two of us observed how the crowd moved around and interacted with the Opinionizer.

At the beginning of the party, the first people to arrive tended to congregate near the buffet table (in the center of the room). This made it difficult for us to show them the Opinionizer. We had to explain first what it was about before they would move over to it. At first we tried to *invite* people to come over and post an opinion, but they were rather wary of doing so, assuming it would require them to participate in what they thought was a demonstration. The perception most people have of agreeing to take part in a demonstration is it will involve a high level of commitment in terms of time and also possible risk of social embarrassment (such as the fear of making a fool of oneself in public). Hence, there was considerable resistance to accepting our invitation. Other reasons why people may have been reluctant at this stage of the proceedings included being nervous, the screen initially being blank with no other opinions, and not realizing how easy it was or how few steps were involved in posting an opinion. We decided to abandon the ‘enticing’ approach in favour of waiting for the space by the Opinionizer to fill up with people on its own accord.

After half an hour the room got very full, and people were much more comfortable volunteering to take part when standing next to the Opinionizer to begin with. After the first few people had added their avatar plus comment, a ‘momentum’ effect

began to emerge, whereby the more people who interacted with the system, the more other people wanted to follow suit. Many people observed others having a go and seeing how easy and fun it was to take part, wanted to then have a go themselves. As shown in figure 3, the rate of participation over time increased as the evening wore on. We also noticed as the evening wore on that people knew how to use the system without needing any explanation from the helper – they appeared to have picked up this knowledge through observing others interacting with Opinionizer. This form of vicarious learning was also helped by the fact that we had deliberately designed the Opinionizer to have a ‘walk up and use’ interface (drag and drop with text input via keyboard), allowing people to see at a glance what to do.

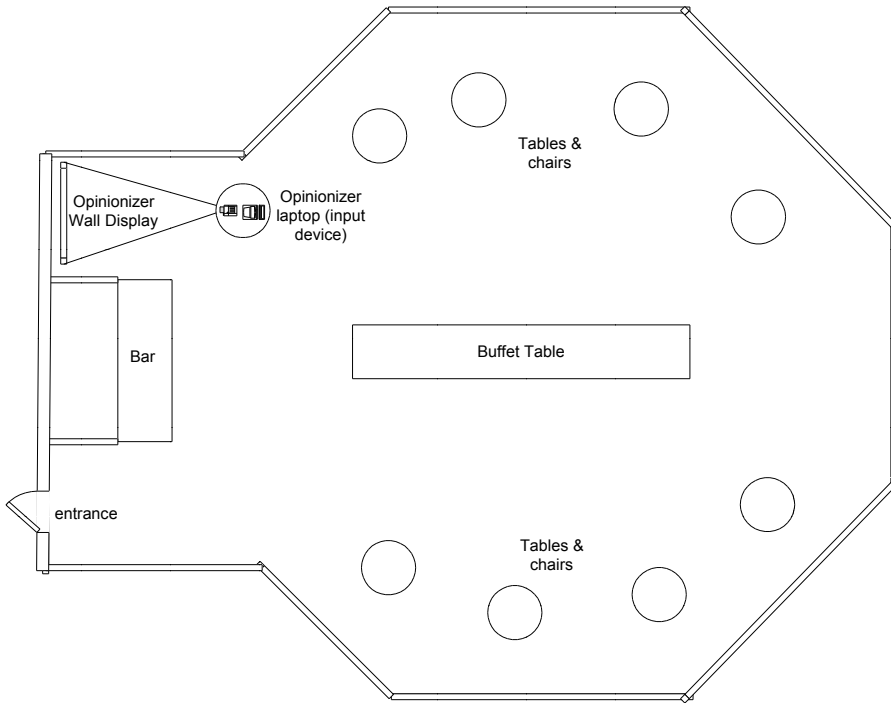


Figure 2: Room layout of party, showing physical location of Opinionizer display and laptop

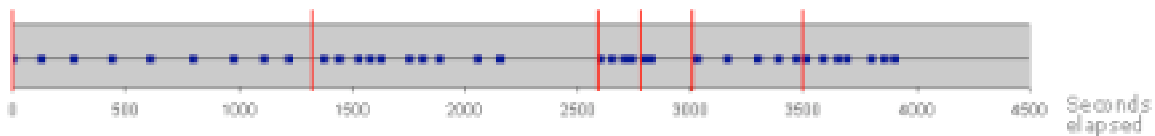


Figure 3: A timeline showing the rate of participation at the beginning of the party. The dots show when a comment was added and the lines indicate when a new question was placed on the board

About 40 people typed in comments to the Opinionizer and many more stood around observing what was going on. As with the pilot study, we found that many of the opinions were humorous (62%). For example, in response to the first question “are you missing Bill Gates this year?” they included:

P1: “Oh Yes! Bill I miss you!!! Please Come back! Oh Please!!!!”

P2: “Bill is in court where he belongs”

P3: “Bill Who?”

P4: “I love you man! Wish you were here!”

P5: “No, but I wish I had missed him last year”

P6: “Who needs him anyway? :-)”

Generally people chose to identify themselves on screen only by their first names or nicknames. This was interesting given the fact that it was quite easy for nearby onlookers to see who was typing each comment. Perhaps, they were choosing to do this because it provided ‘just enough’ identification for immediate social contact (e.g. those in close proximity or conversation with the user while they used the Opinionizer) while still leaving it vague enough to prevent social embarrassment and identification from a wider, unknown audience.

Around the Opinionizer display itself we observed a ‘honey-pot’ effect. By this we mean the progressive increase in the number of people in the area around the display and the place where people were typing in their comments, creating a momentum and ‘buzz’ in the locality. We would also argue that the effect of standing near the Opinionizer and showing interest (e.g. visibly facing the screen or reading the text) gave out an implicit signal to others that they were open to discussion and interested in meeting new people (see figure 4).



Figure 4: The honey pot effect: (a) people gathering round the keyboard to add their comments and (b) the Opinionizer board in context

This claim is supported by our observations of people standing around the display making a number of comments to their neighbours. These included direct references to the opinions being posted on the board, what the Opinionizer was about and whether they had had a go themselves. These initial ‘ice-breaking’ conversations then paved the way for further discussions to take place. It was difficult, however, to assess the extent to which people who did not know each other previously, initiated conversation through being in the presence of Opinionizer, as we were unable to record any of the conversations at the time. A further study is planned, however, where we will place a different version of the Opinionizer in a bar, where fresher students meet at the beginning of term, and where we will video-track randomly targeted students together with collecting follow-up interviews.

A typical trajectory that took place was one where a person (or group of people) moved into the honey-pot space, and for a while remained as onlookers watching what appeared on the display and what others were doing. Then after observing and picking up what was going on they would move towards the ‘input station’ and join a ‘line’ to wait for their go. It was often at this stage that they would initiate a conversation with others who were waiting or had just typed in their comments and were watching how others responded to them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our preliminary study of placing a large display into a social setting to encourage people in a crowd to participate in a *virtual* social space and in so doing allow them to initiate conversation with co-located people standing around, appeared to be successful. Participants posted their opinions, without any feelings of embarrassment or self consciousness. An interesting phenomenon that emerged was the honey-pot effect, where a physical space around the Opinionizer became ‘marked’, drawing in a crowd, which in turn created a certain kind of social affordance, creating a physical/virtual space where it becomes socially acceptable to spark up conversations with others. The display also provided a cognitive trace [6] of ongoing opinions, enabling onlookers to use as a resource for talking, giving them another entry point into a conversation via a shared point of reference [2].

The facilitatory role of the honey-pot effect is interesting when considering the design issue of having a single input location versus allowing multiple, remote input locations (e.g. via cell-phone). The benefit of having only one place where comments can be added is that it provides a focal point [1], making people in that space more ‘available’ to others. In contrast, allowing people to send their comments via a mobile phone, say, makes them less visible and potentially more like ‘lurkers’ that are known to inhabit virtual communities [4]. Moreover, their attention would be primarily diverted to their personal mobile phone screen, making them less available for passing conversation.

Some preliminary lessons from our study suggest that the design of technology-mediated ice-breakers need to:

- have a lightweight interface, which is simple and quick to use
- be able to learn vicariously, so that people can simply walk up and use it, having watched others do the same

- be clear to the person that interaction with the system will be a low commitment activity which will be quick and enjoyable

Finally, we propose that using such technology-based solutions to support more subtle ways of ice-breaking in social gatherings could prove to be effective in other contexts like reception parties, where business people need to meet each other and network and ‘third places’ (informal neighborhood gathering places) such as cafes, shops and bars [5], where neighbours may need a helping hand in developing relationships within their community. Here, the shared display could act as a magnet drawing people together, while also enabling them to communally observe changing information appropriate to the context and add to it.

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