

Technologies of Community, Conversation By Design:
How should networked, public spaces be designed?
Associate Professor Warren Sack, UC Santa Cruz

Warren Sack, associate professor in film and digital media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, spoke about the loss of public space, outlined the role that “discourse architecture” can play by approaching media design as conversation design, and demonstrated an example of discourse architecture in Metavid.org.

Professor Sack began by referring to Ray Oldenburg’s theory of “third places,” the anchor points of a community that people frequent after the home and the workplace, which facilitate conversations among strangers. These places are being lost as public places are splintering into shards. Americans know their neighbors less and see each other less often at gatherings and clubs. He referred to Guy Debord, who said in his *Society of Spectacle* that there is a tendency in each new technology to further isolate people from one another. Television is by design a one-way transmission and even cell phones and computers most frequently encourage contact only within a limited, pre-existing social circle.

But there are constructive and deconstructive forces to any new technology and there are spaces within new media where new contacts and discussions are being made. By analyzing how these conversations are occurring and understanding and detecting patterns of discussion that form a “discourse architecture,” we can then design new technology to further serve them and foster more widespread use of these virtual public spaces.

Professor Sack presented graphs showing the results of the conversation analysis work his department has done, plotting the patterns of online newsgroup discussions. Unlike the linear question-reply lines one finds in an email inbox, the structures of these threads branch out radially, some with subdivisions so numerous and complex that they resemble a fractal. By analyzing the content of these discussions, they found that participants could be characterized according to a number of performed roles. Some participants might typically post with messages that resolve an issue, some might only open new forums, and others may moderate between multiple topics. Most often, these performed roles align with the assigned roles in a company: administrators, developers, and users, which supports Professor Sack’s vision of institutions themselves operating as a set of conversations.

However, the structure of national political debate does not graph so neatly because these discussions tend to fall into sharply divided “red and blue” polemics. Professor Sack characterized the tendency of blogs to only link to sites with like-minded political orientation as disheartening and unhelpful to real critical thinking. But there is hope to be found, he said, in analyzing the editorial process behind the architecture of Wikipedia. There, a simple restriction on the number of times content may be deleted has led to a drastic cut in article “edit wars” and washed out much of the polemics, bringing the site

closer to its goal of being a truly collaborative effort that encourages open conversation and still arrives at agreements.

Professor Sack then introduced Metavid.org, a site being developed by Michael Dale and Aphid Stern at UC Santa Cruz's Social Computing Lab and currently running in a beta-testing form. The site is an open access archive of video and associated data from United States House and Senate floor proceedings. Its architecture is built on many of the same tenets as Wikipedia: it is open content, public domain, open source and patent-free from the ground up. He outlined five interfaces that are available for using the site: The Citizen, for searching and watching clips, The Blogger, for embedding clips and writing about them, The Media Producer, for incorporating clips into other video sequences, The Application Program, for building complementary web sites, and The Platform Developer, for copying the basic architecture for similar projects. He mentioned that although the Platform Developer has seen relatively little use so far, a city council in Montana and even the Parliament of Kenya have adopted some of Metavid's components for their own projects.

He demonstrated the utility of the site by searching for "Dennis Kucinich." Results yielded a collection of videos encompassing everything Kucinich has said during House or Senate proceedings. He said that the final version of the site has the potential to keep a transcript and closed caption of every video, created, and maintained by users with discussion and history pages similar to Wikipedia. The videos can be embedded in blogs, watched in iTunes, kept as they update like an RSS feed, and are being stored in multiple formats via a working arrangement with Archive.org.

At this point Professor Sack opened up the floor for questions. Most of the questions asked were concerned with the open-contribution nature of Metavid.org, and the usefulness of analyzing online discussions in relation to national politics.

One audience member asked if the "third spaces" created online need necessarily be political, considering that books, films, and fan culture enjoy a wealth of discussion on message board sites. Professor Sack responded that, while discussion in these areas of culture is still better than remaining isolated and inactive, to be interested in one's neighbor as regards national politics is a much different venue than regarding culture – one that prepares us to be more informed and better citizens.

When asked about the wisdom of putting deliberation in the hands of public decision-making, he explained that the site itself is less of a democracy and instead operates more around small-arm republicanism, with the aim of getting the public to pay better attention to what their representatives are saying. He used The Daily Show as an example – their writers frequently search C-SPAN's archives to illustrate how the President's stances on certain issues have changed over time. Because this site is completely open-source and public domain, it can become a tool for other media productions to incorporate the videos without having to license them through entities like C-SPAN.

An audience member raised the point that it is impossible to plot the "lurkers" on charts of online discussion – that is, users who merely read and find information but do not

contribute. Professor Sack agreed, saying that a problem frequently encountered in a message board set-up is that the people who know, don't talk, and the people who don't know, talk. He referred to one of ethnographer Rachel Strickland's surveys of internet users, which found that many times users who do have authoritative information will not contribute to discussions due to a perceived lack of benefit from participating.

Two audience members asked questions regarding the presentation of Metavid's material. On Wikipedia, the page that users see appears authoritative, while editor discussion occurs at a "backstage" level. How can Metavid get users to engage with the material and make the conversations themselves the highlight if it pushes them below the surface in the same fashion? Professor Sack explained that in their case, they hope that merely putting the site up and keeping it running will be enough to gain active participation from users as word-of-mouth spreads, in the same way that Wikipedia was first presented. He mentioned that although Congress does keep its own record of everything said in session, their record undergoes significant revision before it is released. On Metavid, the primary source will remain at the top with a transcript containing edits that can be immediately identified and checked for accuracy, while the discussion about it on a secondary level.

CCNMTL's associate director of education and research, Ryan Kelsey, asked how a tool like Metavid could promote a better, more constructive kind of conversation among students. Professor Sack said that there must be some notion of authority and policing in forums like this – allowing anyone to say whatever they like without check leads only to confusion. One way forums have tried to do this is by requiring all users to log in with their real names, although many influential movements have been led by anonymous pamphleteers, so there are no easy answers. Mutual accountability is the key notion that must be built in.

Professor Sack closed by addressing what he sees as the unfortunate situation with most media content: that it is not about hypothesis and analysis, but instead composed of public sentiment. His department's difficulty as designers is working in a world of sentiment using tools of objective information, and his hope is that projects like Metavid will create new spaces for constructive discussions that are rooted in their primary sources.