International Communication Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA, USA (May 24-28, 2007)

The 57th Annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) took place from May 24th to 29th, 2007, at the Hilton hotel in San Francisco. Since the size of the conference has been kept about the same over the past few years while submission numbers are increasing, the acceptance rate has gone down; leading to an overall higher quality of research papers and presentations. This year, throughout the five-day conference over 2,100 attendees (25% non-USA) were given the opportunity to choose from more than 425 refereed (interactive) paper sessions, workshops, plenary sessions, thematic panels and meetings; all representing the latest advances in the field of communication.

The promising title of this year’s ICA conference Communication ‘Comment, Control and Critique’ received a tremendous response. This theme reflected both the transformations in mass mediated content and the diversity of ways in which people participate in complex information and communication environments. The conference goal was to bring into focus a key aspect of communication that often receives less attention than communication texts, impacts and contexts. Yet, the economic, social, political and technological conditions for creating communication of all kinds are changing, raising challenging questions about what is communicated, associated processes of power and control, and possibilities for critique.

An array of options was offered for high-standard pre-conferences at ICA in 2007. The topics included a great variety: (1) Methodologies of Comparative Media Research in a Global Sphere: Paradigms-Critique-Methods; (2) Digital Storytelling: Critical Accounts of a Californian Export; (3) Making Communication Studies Matter: Field Relevance/irrelevance to Media, Library, Electronic Communication System, Designs, Policies, Practices; (4) Mobile Communication: Bringing Us Together or Tearing Us Apart?; and (5) Setting the Agenda for Communication Research: The Next Five Years. All of these were designed to be on a smaller scale but more interactive among participants, including major players in the specific topic areas.

On Thursday, the conference started with the special plenary opening session ‘Communication and Critique: Reflections On the Critical Role of Communication Scholarship’. After Sonia Livingston’s introduction, various speakers and other attendees explored and discussed stimulating and diverse perspectives on the possibilities for critique in communication scholarship. The opening session was immediately followed by the opening welcome reception.

Next to specific presentations about the conference theme, business meetings, pre-conferences and receptions, various panels discussed other Communication related issues from different perspectives. In general, all (interactive) panel sessions addressed questions about the constitutive and emergent properties of communication, so as to inquire whether and how the conditions for creating communications are changing and to pursue the wider implications of these changes across the field of communication and beyond. To give a total overview of the presented and discussed topics is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, only some highlights will be addressed that are interesting for Media Psychology.

The Division Mass Communication was most strongly present with more than 44 sessions. In a session on Identification, Parasocial Relationships and the Media Experience, all presentations were focused on various ways of involvement with mediated characters. For
instance, a study on mediated involvement with celebrity hero Steve Irwin was presented by William Brown and Benson Fraser. This study showed that Irwin was considered to be a hero and an influential role model for wildlife conservation. Cynthia Hoffner presented a study on parasocial interaction and identification with liked, neutral and disliked characters. Results showed that across the whole sample, parasocial interaction, but not identification, was a significant predictor of reported change to be more like the character.

In another interesting panel session, Emotions and Communicative Processing of Media Content, panelists clarified the role emotions play within communicative processing of media content and vice versa. Emotions in and as a result of communicative processing were highlighted within reception processes of diverse types of media genres.

Also strongly present this year was the Division Communication and Technology with 34 sessions. In one interesting session chaired by Shyam Sundar, mainly German presenters discussed the effects of visuals in embodied agents. For instance, Nina Simons, Nicole Krämer and Stefan Kopp presented the effects of an embodied agent’s nonverbal behavior on users’ evaluation and behavioral mimicry. Results showed that self-touching gestures of the virtual agent compared to no self-touching gestures have positive effects on the experiences and evaluations of the user, whereas eyebrow raising evoked less positive experiences and evaluations in contrast to no eyebrow raising. Results of a pilot study on the effects of computer simulated gaze in avatar based conversations were presented by Felix Eschenburg, Gary Bente and Nicole Krämer. Consistent with the literature the longer gaze duration was found to cause significantly better evaluations of the interaction partner.

In a panel on Digital Media, Credibility and Youth, panelists discussed and explored various issues in order to understand how young people assess the quality of information to which they have access via digital media.

The annual ICA conference has become one of the largest international conferences on Health Communication. In a high density session of the Division Health Communication on News Coverage related to Cancer and Obesity, Robin Nabi and Abigail Leigh Prestin talked about the effect of emotional health news coverage on disease risk perceptions and intentions to engage in protective health behaviors. In a session on Influence of Traditional and New Media on Adolescents’ Health Behavior, Kathleen Beullens and Jan van den Bulck discussed the findings of their study on the relationship between adolescents’ viewing of specific television genres (action movies, news and music videos) and the intention to take risks in traffic. More news viewing was associated with a higher perceived risk of drunk driving and speeding while more music video viewing was negatively associated with perceived dangers of speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol. Action movie viewing did not make a significant contribution.

One very dynamic panel session of the Division Information Systems was the session on Doing Research With Avatars: Current Trends, Predictions, and Warnings, chaired by Kristine L. Nowak. According to the panelists, avatars also allow researchers to control features of the environment, interface, or interaction, which can facilitate the ability to examine how communication and social processes work. Avatars in virtual environments provide an ideal venue for investigating a variety of research questions about how people process objects, people, or animals. Panelists Jeremy Bailenson, Byron Reeves and Frank Biocca summarized research on the design and usage of avatars, considering what is known about the effects of using avatars, and made predictions about the future of avatar development and technology design and research.
In a session on Processing of Narrative in Media Content, Michael Shapiro and others shared results of a study on the influence of context, emotion and gender stereotypes on the realism of media stories. They showed that the situation, the response, and the specific emotion had large, complex effects on perceived appropriateness and realism, but character sex and notions of sex role had less impact than expected. Bradford Owen discussed results of his experimental study on the affective aspects of understanding of narrative. Results suggested that feelings for the movie characters may outweigh narrative comprehension in producing viewer enjoyment.

The paper and panel proposal submissions of the Division Game Studies had more than doubled since 2006. As a result, the rejection rate increased from 1/3 to 2/3, a relatively high rejection rate for the annual conference. In a panel session chaired by Peter Vorderer, four recently conducted empirical experiments that investigated different aspects of video game enjoyment were presented. Christoph Klimmt, together with Albert Skip Rizzo, Peter Vorderer, Jan Koch and Till Fischer, discussed suspense as a dimension of video game enjoyment. Tilo Hartman related moral disengagement to the enjoyment of violent video games, and his presentation showed that narrative cues like fighting for a just purpose foster moral disengagement and breed enjoyment. Another Game Studies panel, chaired by John Sherry, focused on why people play video games. In this session various new perspectives on motivations to play video games were presented and discussed.

Another highlight of this year’s ICA conference was The Politics of Publishing: The Future Of Academic (Book) Publishing, focused on the changing structures and institutions of the book publishing industry. Its starting point was the irony that one of the only media industries in which academics are directly involved as active players is the publishing industry, and yet this is the one media industry about which academics know almost nothing.

Overall, we can say that the 57th annual conference of the ICA was again a successful and fruitful one. Many delegates from many countries attended the San Francisco conference, continuing a run of well-attended conferences in recent years. Some key topics received increasing attention, like Mediated Characters, New Media and more specifically Games, but all presentations provided us a clear picture of the tremendous amount of interesting research in the field of Media Psychology. The next ICA conference will be held in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, from 22 to 25 May, 2008.

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