

Communicating among different scientific communities

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GIUSEPPE MANTOVANI

COMMUNICATING AMONG DIFFERENT SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITIES

(SYNTHESIS)

I wish to thank the colleagues who discussed my paper for their insightful comments which enrich our discourse on the Internet and at the same time offer me a good occasion to clarify my point of view.

Peter Glotz and Gunther Hack expand the historical perspective which I referred to in my paper. They are right in tracing the origins of the topic of HCI back to the works of Norbert Wiener (1948), Licklider (1960), and Clynnes and Kline (1960) on cybernetics. It was then, as Glotz and Hack tell us, that the problem of developing a «creative, interactive communication» between humans and machines was given the emphasis it merited and still merits, and the necessity of building a «plastic or moldable medium» was fully acknowledged. In my paper I stressed the role of the processes of mediation, which are basically social and cultural. Mediation is provided by artifacts which make possible the relationships between the human actors and their social/physical environment. Artifacts guide and at the same time «constrain» the ways in which people interact with their environments and with themselves: for example, individuals, groups organizations use computers to work, to communicate, to play, to learn — and so they modify their previous ways of working, communicating, playing, and learning and at the same time they shape the web to adapt it to their needs and ongoing practices. In the fluid relationship which takes place among actors, environments, and technologies «it makes no sense to restrict research to either macro- or micro-sociological phenomena or technological details» — so Glotz and Hack conclude their comment — because what we are trying to catch is just the interplay between people and machines and not their abstract opposition.

Gustavo Rossi maintains that «drawbacks of current tools» such the Internet are not to be overestimated and that the incidence of these drawbacks can be reduced through the «good design practices» that the Internet community possesses. This is certainly true; the quality of the interfaces has greatly and constantly improved over the years and Rossi's confi-

dence in future further improvements seems well grounded. Rossi emphasizes the usefulness that the «Design Patterns», originally used in architectural work, can have also for Internet developers. I agree: «Design Patterns» embody not abstract representations of knowledge but situated expertise grounded in practice; this is exactly the concept of expertise which I refer to in my paper (see Carassa 2000).

Paolo Paolini says that my paper offers a good platform for discussion but he is somehow uneasy with the «too quick and simplistic» way in which some relevant topics are treated. The main criticisms are two. The first is that the paper reveals «a very strong bias toward one approach to HCI (the socio-psychological observation), basically ignoring all the others». I am unsure of the meaning of his statement. If Paolini intends to say that the paper reflects a socio-psychological point of view, then I could not disagree because I am fully aware of the fact that my position stems from my knowledge and practice as an academic social psychologist; if on the contrary Paolini intends to say that I purposely overlook other approaches to HCI, then I should strongly object, because my goal for many years has been exactly that of bridging the boundaries separating the technical from the psychological disciplines (Mantovani and Riva 2001).

The second criticism that Paolini levels at my paper is that it «oscillates between, correctly, considering Internet a 'medium', used in several different environments, and, wrongly, considering the Internet a social environment on its own, about which general statements can be formulated». If I understand correctly what Paolini says, I would be glad to solve the problem by assuring him that I consider the Internet just «a medium» — and that I just tried to offer a theoretical framework to understand what a «medium» is from the point of view of cultural and social psychology. I referred also to the Situated Action Theory, which is gaining increasing attention in Cognitive and Social Studies, because I believe that it can shed new light on Computer Mediated Communication. On other questions considered by Paolini — e.g., the fact that computers often enhance interaction among human beings, that context is relevant to understand HCI, that VR may be not the most mature form of HCI — I say: «yes, of course». On these points I have the impression that I mostly agree with Paolini. Actually, when communication involves different research communities, some space for misunderstanding can be expected. What maintains the communication in these situations is patience on both sides of the boundaries and a sincere effort to understand the others' conceptual frameworks.

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