

a(o).i.r 4.0: broadening the band

The fourth annual conference of the Association of Internet Researchers
October 16-19, 2003
Toronto, Canada

Account by Greg Judelman

Introduction

The Association of Internet Researchers AOIR (<http://www.aoir.org/>) held their annual conference (<http://aoir.org/2003>) from October 16-19 in Toronto, Canada. Hundreds of academic papers and research projects were presented covering a wide range of issues relating to the conference theme "Broadening the Band" ["Élargir la bande"]. Of particular focus were analytical perspectives from sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and communications researchers. Major themes included the digital divide, virtual communities, blogging, intercultural and multilingual representation on the web, regulation, politics, learning, and establishing terrain for future research.

The conference, set up in a large hotel in downtown Toronto, distributed talks into five daily time blocks each containing up to nine simultaneous themed panels. The magnitude and diversity of concurrent presentations made for difficult decisions and some mad scrambling from room to room. The dozens of thematically classified panels included "Technology, Culture, and Control", "Online Research Methods", "Religion in Cyberspace", and "Indigenous perspectives on the Internet". Four fascinating keynote speeches were delivered by prominent social scientists including Lucy Suchman (<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/lsuchman.html>), Pierre Levy (http://switch.sjsu.edu/~switch/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?cat=48), Steve Jones (<http://info.comm.uic.edu/jones>), and Jane Fountain (http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/people/Jane_Fountain). After talks and presentations, the lobby buzzed with discussion and analysis of the spectrum of issues being explored by the researchers.

In keeping with the progressive nature of the research, conference organizers implemented a technological infrastructure available to guests throughout the event. Attendees had constant internet access through a wireless broadband connection in the seminar room areas and a separate room with two dozen connected workstations. An experiment was set up to use the Wi-fi connection to maintain a conference blog (<http://edublog.com/aoir/>), several individual blogs (<http://bazu.org/cb4b>) and even a blogcam (<http://jasonnolan.net/cam/>). Next year's conference will be an opportunity to use live blogging with an online forum to produce an environment for real-time collaboration and discussion.

The Issues

Full conference archives will be posted (<http://www.aoir.org/members/index4.html>) but unfortunately only available to members of the AOIR. Non-members can browse the abstracts (<http://aoir.org/2003/abstracts.pdf>) or search all papers (<http://www.ecommons.net/aoir/aoir2003/search.php>). Links cannot be provided to full-text articles but authors' emails are given in some cases as an alternative. Following is a summary of some of the major themes and questions with a few highlighted examples.

Internet Studies: forming a new discipline

Keynote speaker Steve Jones (<http://info.comm.uic.edu/jones>) elaborated on the challenges facing today's internet researches as they endeavour to explore and understand a new and rapidly evolving sociocultural sphere. What challenges face students of a discipline that has not

identified essential texts and is not yet recognized as a department by universities ? How can the interdisciplinarity of the domain be integrated into academia which maintains traditional disciplinary classifications ? More generally, how will the network and real-time communication change our notions of time and space ? What are the ethics of responsible use of the internet and other emerging technologies ? These questions and others need to be addressed in the coming years as researchers apply rigorous methodology and establish their intellectual turf.

Another keynote Lucy Suchman (<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/lsuchman.html>), a former Xerox PARC researcher, gave an eloquent speech outlining lessons from ethnography and anthropology that can be applied to internet research. She reminded the audience to consider trends across media boundaries and to analyze singular phenomena while recognizing the multiplicity of the research context.

Politics

The political sphere was of major significance at the conference with studies reporting on developments in e-government, e-democracy, election campaigns, civic engagement, freedom of speech, and the different political uses of the web in different countries.

Keynote speaker Jane Fountain discussed her work at the National Centre for Digital Government (<http://www.ncdg.org>) and during her speech elaborated on notions of the bureaucratic state in the digital era. Referring to sociologists Karl Mannheim and Max Weber, Ms. Fountain asked what future governments will look like and what the implications for planning and policy development could be. Government and the public sector implement new technologies slower than the private sector due to the complexity of organizational forms and different needs and responsibilities. Future researchers in this area were encouraged to acknowledge the evolving form of bureaucracy and investigate power as a dominant factor in the development of cyberdemocracies.

Renee Van Os (r.vanos@maw.kun.nl) is doing her PhD thesis tracking the use of the internet in various western European countries in relation to the 2004 European Union Elections. She will analyze how different countries build strategies for the dissemination of information, set agenda items, and manage public relations. A pressing question revolves around how a political integration can be achieved in a climate of such cultural diversity. Other researchers showed how important cultural context is in assessing the political content of a website.

Community Building

Anne Beamish (abeamish@mail.utexas.edu), the leader of the University of Texas's ArchNet project (<http://archnet.org>, a resource for Islamic architecture) identified five key factors in building up a successful online community: shared interest, user participation, shared resource access, reciprocity of information, and shared user context. In other studies the important notion of building trust in the impersonal internet was addressed, such as Canadian researcher Sherida Ryan (sherida@openflows.org) who studied the development of an online activist network. Building community online is difficult where physical sensory cues are not possible, and the study concluded that trust is built over time through risk-taking and interdependence.

One interesting panel explored the intersections between online and offline relationships. Lauren Squires (squires_lm@yahoo.com) analyzed the role of communication technology in undergraduate relationships at an American university. Students enter into and develop personal relationships using mobile phones, instant messaging, email, chat, and evidently face-to-face communication. Many students use several of these technologies simultaneously to communicate with others, even while sitting in the same room. Email was found to be useful as a task-oriented tool while telephone was used more for personal interaction.

The Digital Divide

A strong theme, relating to the conference title “Broadening the Band”, was the need to explore issues of access, inclusion and exclusion on the web. Assessing online participation by members of different race, gender, ethnicity, geography, class, sexual orientation, and language communities was the focus of several panels. Specific projects to bridge gaps and means to overcome barriers were studied.

Studies focussed on specific regional issues, such as how the internet has strengthened civil activity and changed activism in China and Japan. Also examined was what the impacts of the internet on everyday life in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, post-Soviet Armenia, and indigenous groups has been. From a more abstract perspective, how do power, control and access factor into the struggle for claiming a cultural stake in cyberspace ? How do social structures and stratifications online relate to those offline ?

Learning and Work

Much research was presented regarding technology and learning. Collaborative environments, knowledge management, online education, and the implementation of new technologies were of primary focus.

How can cultural and geographic distance be bridged through web-based collaboration ? What lessons can be learned from the use in science of email as a cognitive technology ? How do students cope with anxiety and isolation in distance learning programs?

Art

Only briefly explored at the conference were evolving notions of art in the digital era. Brandon Barr (Brandon@bannerart.org) discussed the aesthetics of limitation and why he has participated in the Banner Art Collective (<http://www.bannerart.org>), a group exhibiting net.art squeezed into tiny image formats. At issue were methods used by artists to express themselves in a medium of infinite creative possibilities. Vince Dziekan (vince.dziekan@artdes.monash.edu.au) examined the conceptualization of new museum spaces for the presentation of art that crosses boundaries between the real and the virtual. One such extraordinary structure is Federation Square (<http://www.federationsquare.com.au>), a new art complex in Melbourne, Australia.

Philosophical Questions

Refraining from presenting statistics and addressing more conceptual matters, much discussion was stimulated by philosophical texts. How are notions of identity and place changed in cyberspace? What is the aesthetic of a sensual engagement in visual, sonic, and textual online media?

Pierre Levy's keynote address introduced his Collective Intelligence CI (<http://www.collectiveintelligence.info>) project. A vision for the future of humanity's information society, CI is a model of a culture of collaboration, diversity, dialogue and shared creativity. The system, by measuring and visualizing key cultural factors such as the transmission of heritage, democracy, education, innovation, peace, and health, can be used to assess and improve the overall well-being of a culture. A complex system of ideograms is used to map semantic networks of information and will be implemented in the near future in an experimental software.

Technology: the future of the web

On the technical side, emerging technologies such as broadband, wireless and post-internet networks (e.g. CA*net 4, Internet 2) were briefly addressed. The increasingly visible Semantic Web project (<http://www.w3.org/2001/sw>) was discussed with W3C scientist Charles McCathieNevile (<http://www.w3.org/People/Charles>) via a live chat weblink. The relevance to the semantic web of new web standards such as Resource Description Framework RDF (www.w3.org/RDF) and Scalable Vector Graphics SVG (www.w3.org/Graphics/SVG) were outlined.

Mark Wolfe (mwolfe@ucalgary.ca) presented the research project InSite (<http://www.ucalgary.ca/insite>) which set up a permanent video conference link between several research labs throughout Canada and measured the extent to which the technology could be useful for collaborative work. Key points to ensure a natural, informal communication between participants revolved around the humanization of the technology. Human factors include keeping the video streaming at all times to allow spontaneous interaction, ensuring high quality audio and using a large screen size.

Journalism

Many studies related to the increasingly visible web phenomenon of blogging. The good news for the purpose of this article is that bloggers tend to log events in great detail and much reflection can be found at <http://jasonnolan.net/archives/003747.html>. Discussion centered around cultural changes being brought about online and offline under the influence of the ever expanding “blogosphere”. The opening of a new form of public “commons” and the opportunity for anyone to comment on public and private events has significant effects on real world issues, such as the infamous Trent Lott scandal (<http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,56978,00.html>). A problematic issue of blogs is the trend that social movements are quickly formed but seem to dissolve as the issues lose immediate relevancy (study by Taso Lagos taso@u.washington.edu). Surf the blogosphere using blog search engines such as Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>), Daypop (<http://www.daypop.com>), or BlogDex (<http://blogdex.net>) or join in using the software Movable Type (<http://www.movabletype.org>).

The exploitation of journalistic alternatives to mass media was another theme, particularly those discussing online activism from sites such as MoveOn (<http://www.moveon.org>), the Independent Media Center (<http://www.indymedia.org>), and the World Social Forum (<http://www.wsfindia.org>). The mass media tracking agency Media Tenor (<http://www.mediatenor.com>) circulated printed journals assessing content and agenda setting by various media agencies worldwide.

Conclusion

The conference was a fantastic forum for learning, discussion and debate. The attendees appreciated the opportunity to be immersed in an interdisciplinary and intellectually charged environment. Readers of this article who want to read the papers in detail will have to join the AOIR (<http://www.aoir.org>), but can find more information by searching the abstracts (<http://www.ecommons.net/aoir/aoir2003/search.php>). Looking forward to seeing you all at next year's conference!

Author

Greg Judelman (<http://www.isnm.uni-luebeck.de/~gjudelma>) is working towards a Masters of Science in Digital Media at the International School of New Media (<http://www.isnm.de>) in Lübeck, Germany. His research focuses on the visualization of semantic information networks. He is currently doing an internship in Ottawa working under the supervision of Pierre Levy on the new Collective Intelligence website.