



Robot-Mediated Communication: Opportunities and Challenges

Telepresence robot-mediated communication (RMC) is an emerging mode of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that provides communicators with mechanical “bodies” that are remotely navigable in physical space. Telepresence robots extend the ability of people who cannot or do not wish to travel to be telepresent and interact in remote locations. In this talk, I describe and illustrate this emergent phenomenon, identify issues that it raises, summarize key research findings, and discuss global trends. Specifically, I discuss how telepresence robot-mediated communication affects patterns of social interaction and language use. Robot pilots cannot hear how loud they sound to locals; their peripheral vision is limited, and camera configurations typically do not afford depth perception, making it difficult for pilots to determine how close they are to objects and people. This affects the experiences of the pilot; how locals perceive and respond to the pilot; and how interaction is negotiated and what that interaction looks like. How, for example, does a person piloting a robot make a bid for, and gain, the conversational floor? Do discourse behaviors, including identity performances, carry over from face-to-face interaction, or are they altered by the mediation of the robotic device? How does the asymmetry of most RMC (someone is communicating via a robot, others are not) affect interactional power dynamics? I conclude by considering the future outlook for RMC and argue that it could give rise to strikingly new patterns of human communication.

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