

## 1. Summary of First Meeting

Alison Wood and I met over the ICOM one morning (well, afternoon for her) while I enjoyed a breakfast of Gatorade and Power Bars. The ICOM seemed to be functioning fairly well, so only about fifteen percent of our conversation consisted of “Hello? Are you still there?” However, I didn’t have a set of headphones, so it was a tad awkward when people would walk by and listen to our conversation.

What did I learn about Alison? Well, she likes the outdoors. As an undergraduate at MIT, she studied earth, atmosphere, and planetary sciences. When she graduated with a bachelor’s degree, she bought a one-way ticket to Alaska, where she planned to soak in the stunning natural beauty of its fishes and forests. She did that for a little while until she was offered a fellowship at MLE. These days she’s in Dublin working with Glorianna Davenport, where she’s trying to build technology that encourages people to play outside instead of sitting in front of their computers. This plan is working out relatively well so far except that the technology part of the equation gives her trouble sometimes.

Alison had some exposure to technology as a UROP in the Tangible Media Group when she was at MIT, but she worked more on design and content creation than on writing code or debugging circuits. She was responsible for the stories in Ali Mazalek’s Genie Bottles project, for instance. She does a lot of writing, and even enters writing competitions and creates online hypertext narratives sometimes. In her spare time, she is a fashion model for electric dresses and an amateur sign painter. Alison seems to like orange juice, fried chicken, the Simpsons, and other people’s chocolate flavored Power Bars.

## 2. Summary of Second Meeting

My next meeting was with Karrie Karahalios. I showed up for our meeting at the coffee shop carrying a handful of machine screws, hooks, and aluminum mounting brackets. Karrie asked me what I was building. “I know it doesn’t LOOK like it,” I said, “but this is actually a Valentine’s Day gift in progress.” I explained my plans to build a voice-activated keepsake box, and we discovered that we shared an enthusiasm for building and tinkering, having both taken Neil Gershenfeld’s “How to Make Almost Anything” course. We had both loved the course, but we griped for a while about its difficulty. “I took it the first time it was offered,” Karrie said, “and I couldn’t believe how much material they tried to cover in a semester. Everything from injection molding to FPGAs.”

I washed the aluminum dust off my hands and ordered an iced mocha. Then we got down to discussion. Karrie has been at the Media Lab for many years -- she finished her Master’s degree and now she’s back to work on a PhD. Since I’m a new student at the lab, I found it interesting to hear the perspectives of an old-timer. We talked about the visiting committee, the recent financial controversy, interactions with research advisors, the relationship of the Media Lab to the rest of MIT, and the importance (and the difficulty) of evaluation metrics for new areas of research.

I wasn't sure what to expect out of our meeting—my first impression of Karrie was that she was quiet and reserved. It turned out she was a lot of fun to talk to—witty, insightful, and full of interesting facts, anecdotes, and advice. It's hard to really say too much about her after one 45-minute meeting, but I gathered that she was an enthusiastic and highly dedicated student with a lot of imagination and creative flair.

### **3. Comparison of Meetings: Privacy**

Though Karrie and I met in a public space, there was an implicit understanding that our conversation was private. Societal convention dictates that listening in on a neighboring conversation is extremely rude. There is no such stigma associated with listening to a loudly broadcast videoconference, however. As I talked with Alison, people would walk by and stop to listen in on our conversation, making it difficult to speak openly. Granted, since it was our first meeting, we weren't laying our souls bare, but we were talking about things that defined us, and it was difficult to do this while under public scrutiny. The problem was compounded by the bad arrangement of the iCom installation at One Cambridge Center, which is right in the middle of a high-traffic area with no place to sit down.

At least I knew who was listening in on my end, but I had no way of knowing if people on Alison's end were listening too. This made me appreciate the importance of reciprocity in the iCom design – I felt that it was important that I could see and hear at my end everything that was being transmitted to the other end. I definitely wished that I had brought a headset microphone.

### **4. Comparison of Meetings: Bandwidth and Timing**

The consistency between local and remote representations was violated when it came to the frame rate. I saw a local image with a fast update rate, and a remote image that only updated once a second or so. I was conscious of the fact that I wasn't transmitting video, but rather discrete snapshots, with no way of knowing which frames were actually being received. I found myself wanting to specify which snapshots were sent, so that I would have control over my remote representation.

Limited bandwidth was less of a problem for audio, but the occasional dropout of the audio created some awkward lapses in conversation. I had no awareness of my audio level on the other end, so I was reluctant to speak too loudly. Most of my jokes failed miserably, since humor relies so heavily on exact timing and subtle visual cues. I noticed Alison laughing several seconds after I had told a joke, and wondered what was going on before realizing it was because of the latency.

### **5. Comparison of Meetings: Social Factors**

Conversation on the iCom was noticeably lacking in certain subtle but important visual cues. Body language and gestures such as nodding in agreement, shrugging, and smiling are largely lost in an image that is 300 pixels square. These cues sometimes convey what tone of voice cannot, and I sometimes found it difficult to determine whether Alison was following me or not.

Still, having video along with the audio helped a great deal in getting to know each other. We often used props such as sketches or nearby physical objects in our environments to help us convey ideas. We had each brought along some objects as well,

and these served as excellent fodder for conversation -- doing a sort of “show and tell” was a nice way to describe our interests. Another interesting thing happened when I recognized one of my friends at another iCom portal. I activated the audio at this portal and introduced Alison to my friend.

I think that I learned about the same amount about Alison and Karrie, so ultimately the iCom was an effective tool. Still, it felt less natural than meeting at a coffee shop, and in fact less natural than communicating over email. Perhaps because both Alison and I were very comfortable with contacting strangers over email, it was easier to shoot electronic messages back and forth than to try to have a face-to-face conversation over a remote video link. Because of the delay inherent in email communication, more effort is invested in carefully composing thoughts and sentiments. The immediacy of a teleconference is a bit daunting, since it is much more challenging to be clever and witty “off the cuff” than to be clever in an email, where there is time to compose a well-thought-out response.