Matthew Karau (mattk@media.mit.edu)
MAS890: Workshop in Community-Maintainable Collaborative Online Spaces
Assignment 2: Technology skews our perceptions

To frame the situation, I had face-to-face meetings with Valentina Nisi in Dublin and an iCom meeting with Andrea Lockerd. The goal of this assignment is to reflect on those interactions, how technology affected them, what the other person was able to get right/wrong about my personality, and what can be learned from these interactions.

Let me begin by saying that the experience of using the Icom for 'dating' or at least for sharing semi-personal information was more than a little uncomfortable. Luckily, at MLE, I was in a room with only one or two other people, and I was wearing headphones. However, on the MIT end, Andrea was in the Garden where likely more people are within an ear's shout. I think knowing this changed what each of us said, perhaps her more than me, since she has to see those people face-to-face each day. I didn't realise how non-private our conversation was until Carol Strohecker, my advisor, came over to say 'hi' after I made mention of her name. After that point, I made a conscious effort not to speak openly about my work situation or any controversial subject that might be heard by others who weren't explicitly on our date but were nearby, nonetheless.

Further to that point, I don't think Icom is the correct interaction medium for dates where you truly want to get to know the other person for (at least) three reasons. Firstly, it's not private. Even if both sides are wearing headphones, half of the conversation is overheard by nearby outsiders who you didn't invite on your 'date'. I found that I spoke more loudly when I had the headphones on, as it's hard to guage your speaking volume when cut off from the surroundings. Assuming that you're not initially completely comfortable with the person you're meeting, the fact that you're yelling or at least being overheard by others isn't a natural progression from face-to-face first-time interaction. Secondly, eye contact is unnatural. I found that when I spoke, I naturally looked at Andrea's face on the screen, but then took a second to realise that she didn't perceive this as eye contact, since the camera was down and to my left. Perhaps it's simply a positioning issue, but to give the feeling of eye contact to the other side, you have to look away from their on-screen image – tough to get used to, and God knows I still haven't. Thirdly, images and sound irregularities often lead to vast silences or both sides chanting a test call or waving their hands. This, to me, is like stepping back for a second, completely removing yourself from the date, and becoming a tech-support trouble-shooter. It's simply something that face-to-face dates would not ever encounter, and it gave me the feeling that perhaps this was all a show or was being done as a performance for the unknown persons watching or listening to us. When the audio or visuals cut out, we had a break; again, an unnatural moment of invisibility to the other side.

Enough slamming iCom, though; let's think about how I, as a person fit into the interactions. I think the experiences had many very subtle results that ring home to bigger points about me, the way I interact with others, and the way others perceive me.

I'll begin by saying that both Valentina and Andrea did a bang-up job remembering facts about me. Also, the spurious complements, here and there, were easily incorporated into my image of myself. There were no major facts or ideas about me that either of them had wrong; though, they both have very different angles of who I am. I firmly believe that due to the different ways I feel comfortable to presenting myself in different situations, it's quite easy to see why my virtual date and real date don't see the same pieces of the pie that make who I am.

For instance, in person, I'm relatively reserved and feel comfortable being silent, even when it's not appropriate. Sometimes, I just don't have anything to say. When 'dating' Valentina, I opened up a bit, but as she pointed out in her description of me, I do like to keep to myself, and that's something that would be hard to pick up on without her having passed my desk or seen me in other situations. Not surprisingly, Andrea didn't really pick up on that fact, since being on iCom, to me, felt a bit like being in the spotlight, where we had to pack into an hour as much as we could about each other.

That brings me to a second point, that even though Valentina and I have spent more time getting to know one another, Andrea probably has more factual information about me. That's due to the two completely different styles of interaction I chose. With Valentina, we made a concerted effort not to make the date into a Q&A session. However, with the iCom, the time constraints and a general feel of talking on the phone didn't facilitate a natural interaction – it was more tense, worrying about if she heard me, wondering if time would run out before we even started to get to know each other. The iCom date did turn more into a Q&A session with a few stories mixed in. Many facts were exchanged, and I feel like I know Andrea to some degree, but the iCom can't replace good old fashioned face-to-face.

Thirdly, and lastly (so I can stop rambling), I say that human contact will never be replaced by technology. It will be a sad day, if it ever does. For me, at least, to get to know someone doesn't always come from listening to what they say or seeing semi-still images of them. For me, watching what people do when they have nothing to say or seeing how someone crosses the street or deals with a frustrating situation are often better indicators to the true personality. Arguably, the persons that Andrea and I described to each other over iCom could have been more easily fabricated, as not being there leaves so many of the senses unsatisfied.

I hope that in thinking about this more, there's a way to tap into that richness that is physically being in the same place as another person. As it is, I'm very sceptical as to whether these Media Spaces will ever evolve into something profoundly real. I've knocked iCom plenty, not because I don't like it, but because thinking ideally, it barely nicks the surface of what it means to be truly together in the same space as another.