MAS890 assignment 3: Study the Intricacies of Human to Human Encounters.
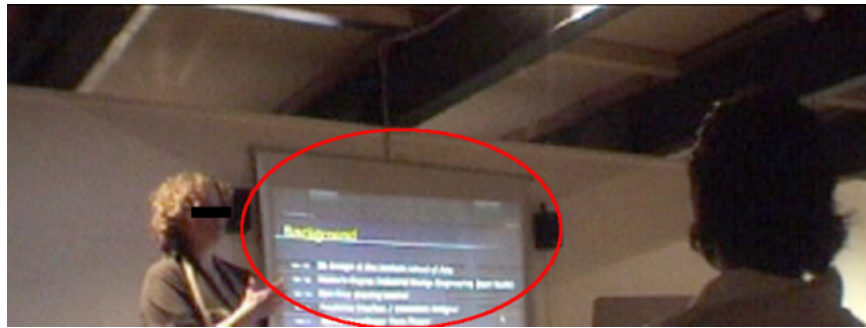
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Dr. Caroline Hummels from Delft University Holland gave a presentation on the 7th of March here in Media Lab Europe on the scope of her research up until that point. We used this as an opportunity to document some interesting features of both the structure of formal presentations, and how people interact and react during them, and thought about how these ideas may be applied in designing an on-line version of this scenario.

What follows is a list of points we found interesting with corresponding still images from the video that was taken on the day.

1. The speaker used a set of slides she had been able to prepare in advance. This seems like an obvious point, but not all current software for meeting over a network allows the users to share documents.

2. Peoples posture and body language was indicative of their engagement with the speaker and what was being said. In the below image we can see some people are leaning forward in a more engaged type position, some are leaning back playing more of an observational role, and some are doing various things with their hands indicating thought or boredom. On top of this people would sometimes unconsciously nod or shake their heads, and murmur ascent or descent for a particular point made by the speaker. These subtleties play a vital role in showing how involved people are in a situation, and how they feel.

The fact that they are often unconscious actions, along with their lack of force make them a particular challenge to convey in a networked environment, but one that the authors feel is vital to tackle.
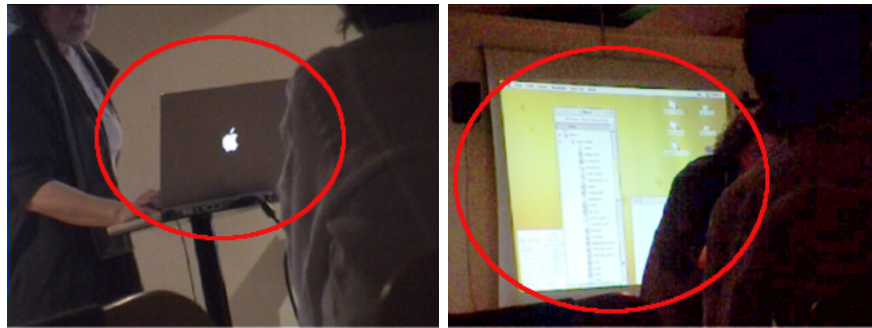

3. Listeners were free to come and go as they pleased. We see in the following two images that people were able to arrive late and still integrate into the talk, and at one stage a person external to the group came to call away one of the members. This flexibility of audience composition and fluidity of change come from the organic nature of the scenario.
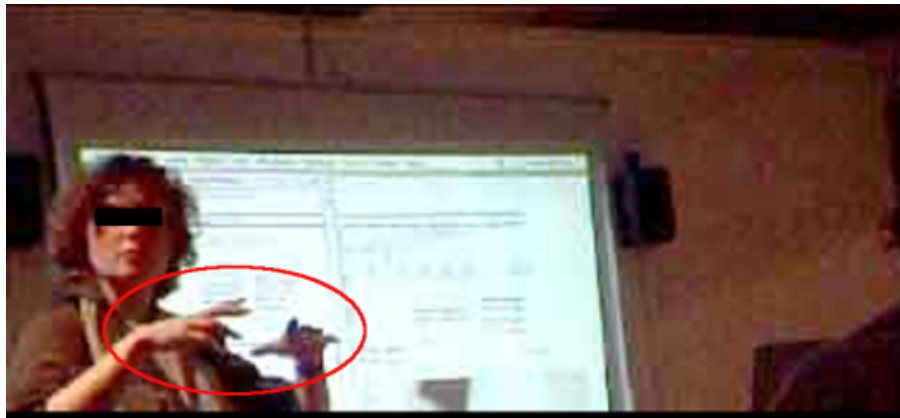

4. As implied in point 2 the listeners were capable of engaging at different levels. On top of the mentioned leaning forward/backwards, some people took notes, some read related material, and one person as can be seen bellow listened in a casual manner while doing other work on her computer. It seems an important feature that people were able to engage on their own terms at a level that suited them.

5. It was interesting to note that some subtle information about the speaker, and to some extent the listeners was given inadvertently. In the first image below we can see that the speaker is an Apple Mac user and probably right handed. The use of a Mac gives some clues to her personality, such as her aesthetic tastes, and technological preferences. In the second picture, we can see her desktop which she brought up on the screen momentarily in order to run an application. This gave further clues about her from what software she ran, how she organised her space, and again her aesthetic tastes from her choice of background image. Similar things could be seen about the listeners from observing their note taking, and any items they brought with them to the talk.

6. The speaker was able to use body language to enrich her descriptions, and stress certain points, along with pointing to objects and people in the room when needed.

7. At one stage the speaker picked up a camera she happened to have with her to demonstrate a point she was making verbally. This ability to improvise would seem to demand a large degree of flexibility in any software system that would hope to take the place of real world talks.

8. Listeners were able to draw notice to themselves when wishing to make a point or ask a question by standing or raising their hand. When this happened the focus of the group switched away from the speaker to this new person in a fluid manner. In the case where several people wished to talk, an informal queuing system established itself where people spoke in the order which they raised attention to themselves. The following two images show a listener first getting the groups attention, then having become the new group focus switching into a more relaxed mode to pose her question.

9. Once the speaker had completed her prepared presentation, the group broke up and reformed into a more informal round-table configuration in which there were either several simultaneous foci, or a single one that changed frequently. Questions were asked, jokes were made, and people interacted in a more relaxed manner in general. This seemed a far better configuration in which to discuss ideas brought up in the presentation. A many-to-many organisation being better for this, rather than the previous one-to-many model which suited the formal part of the presentation.