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Thesis 

Terrell Neuge Conversational analysis of chatroom talk - thesis

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## Introduction

After completing my research for this study a very significant world event took place, namely the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 in New York City, where two passenger jets crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, causing both of them to collapse.

Text-based chatrooms give any person with an Internet connection the opportunity to become a news reporter. Whether it is a disaster, sporting event or any news the first utterance can be the first knowledge of an event made available worldwide. Before CNN, ABC or any other news service can file a report

eye witness accounts are sent to chatrooms, emails, discussion groups. As I have argued throughout this study it is often impossible to know who the chatter is or the validity of his or her statement. However, when someone enters into a chatroom or discussion group and states a plane has just crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City, everyone who is witness to that statement would want to know more.

I have saved the data from three chatrooms running on September 11 and have also collected material from two bulletin boards<sup>[1]</sup>, to compare with text-based chatroom material. I believe it is valuable data, which gives additional insight into how communication is modified by a sudden globally important event. I have chosen three different forms of online text-based discourse, where people are seeking information. I will expand on this in my methodology section. I found this interesting as a researcher in the area of electronic communication. It is almost comparable to the archival material relating to World War Two. In these chats there is captured the immediacy of the events as they unfolded.

Chatrooms, discussion forums and emails are all different approaches to instant communication<sup>[2]</sup> which are a significant part of the on-line society today and in the future. The popularity of these communications has been highlighted during the weeks following the September incidents in New York City.

## Discussion

During the New York events of September 11 many people turned to the Internet for news<sup>[3]</sup> and chatrooms were fully occupied with people talking on this topic. The moment in time that I have captured from the New York City Chat, may, therefore, be a microcosm of a chatroom conversation as it appears in an English speaking chatroom<sup>[4]</sup>.

I viewed several chatrooms on the day of the September 11<sup>[5]</sup> events and though the chatters were talking about an event which began unfolding several hours earlier (the first plane hit the WTC at 8 AM) this was chat 'captured' from 14:56:36, 2001 until 16:16:52, with 644 turns and 4833 words of spoken text covering 80 minutes. The details which we now have a history of, were not known at the time. What was happening was not known. Who was involved was not known. In Australia these events took place during our night and this captured dialogue was accessed at midnight in South Australia: a time when newsrooms were minimally staffed, and basically accessing equally minimal reports on stream from US sources – so that chat streams seemed closer to whatever the reality might be, than media flows. There were people in this chatroom from many countries and time varied for different chatters. However, just looking at this chatroom where the dialogue was simple and there were few questions or opinions offered, we see how there is a strong political element alongside expressions of

fear and simple questions.

I saved data from three chatrooms. Firstly, I used chat captured from a New York City chat site, [www.superglobe.com/](http://www.superglobe.com/). This is a general unmoderated chatroom and often when I have checked this chatroom there was no one in it. This chat is saved at: [http://se.unisa.edu.au/september11/new\\_york\\_city\\_chat.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/september11/new_york_city_chat.htm).

A general chatroom, I am hypothesizing, one with no specific purpose at the start, can change rapidly in the face of a crisis. The chat log has been saved, beginning four hours preceding the second World Trade Centre Tower collapse<sup>[6]</sup> and for one hour and twenty minutes afterwards. The participants before the disaster were two Italian speaking people involved in what appears to be a sexual talk with one another. After the event, the chatroom filled with many participants, speaking mostly in English, from around the world. This was likely to be so because on September 11<sup>th</sup> it was the only site under the phrase 'New York City Chat' that appeared on the search engine Google. The chat below was copied (with permission) from <http://www.superglobe.com/page2sep11.html>. The lines below were entered in the chatroom at 10:49:54 on Tue Sep 11 2001. The translation into English below is from the search engine AltaVista's Babelfish site. I would suggest that the words are difficult to translate into English because of the common misspelling of words and abbreviations used. What is most interesting is that this chat below was two hours after the New York City World Trade Centre crashes. However there is no indication of what part of the world these people were in when they were carrying on their online dialogue. If they were in Italy it would have been 1.30 AM of the day of the events and it would not yet have been reported. This poses a difficulty for a researcher making assumptions of chat talk; that of not knowing where the chatters are located. Why they are using a New York City chatroom is unknown. I would think that if they were living in New York City they would not be carrying on the same conversation now as they were when the emergency in New York had begun two and half hours earlier.

Italian	English
<1> di iniziare a preparare mia madre sul fatto che sono gay e che voglio stare con te, magari in email. Dice che sei tu quello che voglio e ha ragione. Non l'ho mai sentita cosi determinata. 😊	to begin to prepare my mother on the fact that is gay and that I want to be with you, even in email. You say that six what I want and have reason. I have not never felt it cosi determined. 😊
<2> TI AMO	I LOVE TO YOU

<1> ti bagnerei prima di saliva tutto il corpo

I would bathe to you before salted all the body

#### Table Postscript:1 Italian speakers prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> events

The first line after the event of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Centre in this chatroom is as follows.

< b53> are you afraid in New York?

#### Table Postscript:2 First English in September 11 events chat

The first English speaker made an entrance into the chatroom three hours after the Italian participants. The three hours in between the last Italian lines above and the first English have not been included. This was all captured from the New York City Chat Log<sup>[7]</sup>. At times in this chatroom there were seventy lines of chat scrolling by per minute after the event.

Secondly, I have taken a sample of an edited-moderated text-based chatroom from the ABC News chatroom which was online at 7.30 p.m. New York Time of the same day, ten hours after the event. ABC News' Aviation specialist John Nance, a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force reserve, is invited into the chatroom to answer questions.

The headline question to the chat began with:

How easy is it to hijack a plane? Are pilots trained to handle such a situation?

ABCNEWS Aviation Analyst John Nance will answer your questions about today's events in a live chat at **7:30 p.m. ET...** If you have a question for John Nance, please type it in the space below and click on "Post Message."

Strictly speaking, to call this chatroom a 'chatroom' is a misnomer. A person writes their message, which goes into a queue accessible only to the chat moderator who selects and posts the answer by the 'guest speaker'. The original text is rewritten by ABC editing. So it is not only moderated, but the text is also edited. This type of chatroom is called an edited-moderated chatroom, and operates as an information "deepening" flow associated with news services.

Thirdly, my example of an unmoderated chatroom, which I have used for comparison with the moderated edited



and turn taking dialogues were ‘spoken’ on the Internet on this day. I used an emergency chat discussion in case study 1, which centred on one area of crisis in one area, which affected, for the most part, one place in the world. This event affected the whole world.

*America under attack* (72804 messages) in the ‘HOT TOPICS’ section was only exceeded by *Guns under fire* (77402 messages). Within chatroom services such as CNN chatroom and ICQ and IRC chatrooms and many yahoo chatrooms, there were many conversations regarding the events of September 11 2001. Two articles that sum up the feelings expressed at that time are,

*‘Online chat ranges from hate to sympathy’* “Like many other Arab-Americans, Walid Besharat went online this week to help make sense of Tuesday's horrific suicide hijackings, an attack widely believed to have been masterminded by the militant Islamic fringe. What he found was both comfort and fear. On America Online chat boards, interspersed between expressions of sympathy and intense discussions of the meaning and cause of the tragedy, Besharat said he saw many people venting anti-Arab hatred.”  
*By Jim Hu CNET News.com Friday September 14 06:00 PM EDT.*

*‘Net offers lifeline amid tragedy’* “People in New York City and around the globe turned to the Internet on Tuesday to communicate with their families and to grasp the horrific sequence of terrorist attacks that transformed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon into disaster zones. Unable to connect via wireless and landline phones, many New Yorkers posted messages on Web sites, signed on to instant chat services, and used e-mail to contact loved ones. "There is no phone service in or out of Manhattan, so e-mail is the way to communicate. We are OK," read one e-mail message a worker in New York's Equitable building sent to friends and relatives.” Stefanie Olsen Staff Writer, CNET News.com September 11, 2001, 12:45 p.m.

In unmoderated chats participants are allowed to express themselves<sup>[9]</sup> without fear of censorship. My interest in these chatrooms is whether one is able to better carry on a dialogue and exchange meaning in an unmoderated chatroom than in an moderated chatroom. My analysis is based on whether conversation was understood as a result of the utterances involved. Clearly, if someone asks a question, whether it is to one particular person or to the room in general, the person is hoping to receive an answer. This difference can be seen in the six turn takings in the table below:

## Comparison

Moderated Chat		Unmoderated Chat	
<a href="http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/unmoderated.htm">http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/unmoderated.htm</a>		<a href="http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated.htm">http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated.htm</a>	
Chatter	utterance	chatter	Utterance

<p>Brian (Dublin Ireland) at 8:01pm ET</p>	<p>Is this going to change aviation in America and indeed around the globe? The whole terrorist operation seems to have happened far too easily?</p>	<p>[texasrose_28_99]</p>	<p>I THINK THE USA NEEDS TO BE ALOT MORE CAREFUL ABOUT - WHO THEY LET IN TO THE USA.</p>
<p>ABCNEWS' John Nance at 8:01pm ET</p>	<p>Change following this act of war, because that's what it is, is inevitably going to affect the way we process and accept passengers in North America, if not throughout the world.</p>	<p>[MrAnderson]</p>	<p>US deeply regrets the death &amp; reverences the loss of the - great Lion of Panjshir....</p>
<p>Texas at 8:07pm ET</p>	<p>How long will it take to find ALL the black boxes, and what are the odds of finding the black boxes from the two planes that hit the trade center?</p>	<p>[ZtingRay]</p>	<p>what a dumb ass</p>
<p>ABCNEWS' John Nance at 8:09pm ET</p>	<p>Finding the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder from the aircraft near Pittsburgh and the one that hit the Pentagon will be fairly easy. Finding the two boxes from each of the aircraft that were rammed into the World Trade Center Towers will be infinitely more difficult because of the sheer volume of the wreckage of those 2 buildings. Eventually, the World Trade Center boxes will be found, but it literally could be months.</p>	<p>[AmericanExpress.]</p>	<p>WHAT AFGHANISTAN NEEDS IS A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT - ELECTED BY ALL THE PEOPLE.</p>

Sebastian at 8:17pm ET	I heard rumors concerning a number of planes unaccounted for. Do we know for certain where all of todays flights ended up?	[oliv]	WHI AMERICANS JUST BE YOUR COUTRY,NO INVADER ANOTHERS COUNTRYS
ABCNEWS' John Nance at 8:19pm ET	At this hour, almost 10 hours after this horror began, it's pretty clear that there are no further "missing" aircraft.	[fRANKIE]	fuck you oliv

**Table Postscript:4 moderated vs. edited-unmoderated example**

The differences between moderated and unmoderated in this small example are clear. The examples on the left show clearly written sentences, with no spelling errors, and carefully worded sentences. The answers appear very quickly, possibly too quickly for a typist. It is possible that a voice recognition device is aiding the writer. The order of responses is very sequential. The chatter asks a question, and the response or reply is given. There is no crossing over of threads of conversation. The randomness of voices, which you find in unmoderated chat is not present. In this chatroom, the 'expert' (in this case John Nance) can choose which question he answers.

In the unmoderated chat in the preceding example, people are expressing anger, confusion (see the swearing, the use of upper case letters, the poor spelling) These are all typical of chat (as I have shown in my thesis) where people are unrestrained, far more than they would be in face to face situations.

## Conclusion

It is in the immediacy of a crisis when little is known about the historical events<sup>[10]</sup> that are being played out, that we have what is the raw data, before it is translated or interpreted to fit various world views, and here we have discourse, at its purest level. I will refer to this in the future as 'raw discourse'. Chatroom could be the only form of discourse where people can say whatever they want, without fear of repercussion.

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[1] Saved from Google groups on September 11 2001

<http://groups.google.com/groups?threadm=DNnn7.18524%24151.1610065%40bgtnc05-news.ops.worldnet.att.net>

[2] STAMFORD, Conn., Mar 6, 2002 (BUSINESS WIRE) -- Nielsen//NetRatings, a leading Internet audience measurement service, today released its Fourth Quarter 2001 Global Internet Trends report on Internet access and penetration, finding a total of 498 million people now have Internet access from home (see Appendix A.Table 1 [http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/appendixes\\_all.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/appendixes_all.htm))

[3] The search engine Google reported a huge increase in traffic on September 11, 2001. See, [http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue6\\_10/wiggins/](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue6_10/wiggins/) viewed September 23, 2001.

[4] In the September chatroom which I have referred to further down there were several non-English speaking people dialoguing about the events in New York City. For example,

1.	15:06:09	oscar: esperes español novyk?
2.	15:06:10	1Bone!!: Who did that in NY??
3.	15:06:10	OmarHawk: wer ist aus deutschland?
4.	15:06:16	Hello: Stadi rules
5.	15:06:18	captain_insaneo: hey whats going on over in new york?????
6.	15:06:20	novyk: si, de Madrid
7.	15:06:26	Hello: Turku on New York
8.	15:06:31	Pete: aa jee meitsi on Hyvinkäältä

[5] Two other chatrooms I have saved are a moderated chat site from: 1. ABCNEWS which moderated dialogue between participants and Aviation Analyst John Nance the evening of the first day of these events and from an Afghan chatroom (the Afghan chatroom is no longer available and I have saved these sites to the University of South Australia's site at [http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated\\_unmoderated.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated_unmoderated.htm))

[6] 10:05 a.m.: The south tower of the World Trade Center collapses.

[7] 'The following log files were taken from the logs of the New York chat room during September 11, 2001. These are not the complete logs, only a few hours after the tragic events. Every country (just about) visited the room to voice there concern and get more info. Some visitors weren't so friendly so procede at your own risk!' The following log files were taken from the logs of the New York chat room during September 11, 2001. These are not

the complete logs, only a few hours after the tragic events. Every country (just about) visited the room to voice their concern and get more info. Some visitors weren't so friendly so proceed at your own risk!

[8] Afghan chat is saved at: <http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated.htm>

[9] One chatter in this dialogue went by the username of, [AmericanExpress.]

[10] Discourse may play as much a part of how an event becomes historical as the actual event itself. As events of the past, such as, religious or political activities are based on what a few have recorded we have little data or proof of the events or whether the people mentioned as being party to the events actually did what is said they did. With the current opportunities of creating actual replayable transcripts of events, if the transcripts are doctored, we can have a better judgement of the events.