

Means of Online Communication in the 1990s

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Media and communication channels enabling face-to-face interaction have made significant progress and their numbers have increased considerably during the last few decades. One of the most recent growing phenomena is communication via computers and Internet. In the 1980s when several countries initiated the setting up of their own computer networks (MFENet, HEPNet, UseNet in the USA, Minitel in France, and the common EUNet in Sweden, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark), the number of Internet users was relatively small. Since then on there has been an exponential increase in the use of the net. In 1983, 562 computers were connected to the Internet. By 1989 the number was over 80,000, in January 1998 – 26,670,000, in July 1998 – 36,739,000 (*Internet host count history*). According to 1996 statistics 186 countries or territorial units had some kind of Internet connection, while in 51 countries there was no Internet connection at all (OTI). A year later the corresponding figures were 195 and 42 (Connectivity). The number of Internet users in January 1998 was estimated at 117 million people, a year later the corresponding number was already 183 million (ITU). In Estonia, the UUCP-connection¹ was introduced in August 1990, the online connection in April 1992. The results of a public survey conducted by Baltic Media Facts in February 1997 revealed that the number of every-day computer users was 116.000 people, i.e. 10,5% of population between the ages 15 and 74, and the average daily number of Internet users was 38.790, or 3,5% of people between the ages 15 and 74 (BMF).

¹) UUCP – Unix-to-Unix CoPy. A method, protocol and set of programs for transmitting UseNet news, e-mail and files between Unix-computers. As compared to TCP/IP it requires less resources, but has also limited functions. It is quite popular in Estonia. It is the most inexpensive way of connecting to the Internet.

The Internet provides several technologically different means for interactive communication. People are becoming used to the fact that with the spread of Internet ordinary correspondence, or snail-mail is being substituted by e-mail and any information needed is easily accessible on web-pages. Far less information is available through other means of direct communication, such as an ordinary telephone connection. Every kind of human interaction benefits greatly from the spread of folklore, irrespective of whether it is transmitted face-to-face, by letter or phone or via a computer network. While chain-letters sent by e-mail, anecdotes on web-pages, and urban legends and horror stories are considered to be written folklore as spread through the Internet, then any textual means of direct communication is a combination of both oral and written folklore. It is almost speech in real time travelling between communicators in the form of ASCII symbols. In folklore studies the study of means of direct communication is comparable to the study of application of folklore (e.g. anecdotes, urban tales, paremia, etc). Here new computer-related folkloric phenomena can be discovered. The current article focuses on the introduction of a new means of direct communication.

Five different types of textual direct communication that operate in real time can be distinguished in Internet, i.e. its users can exchange texts within seconds, depending on the congestion of communication lines. These five types are:

1. talk
2. IRC
3. text-related chat rooms
4. chat rooms with audio-visual supplements
5. MUD.²

Talk is an Internet protocol enabling the communication between two people in real time. A less common service is multi-talk which enables the simultaneous communication of 2–4 people.

²) In addition there exist or are being developed a number of ways of using the Internet for phoning. This poses a potential threat to giant telephone corporations.

When phoning via the Internet the user has to pay local tariffs in both countries. For this reason interest in ordinary long-distance telephoning is fading and this will consequently lead to a reform in the price of telephone services.

IRC (Internet Relay Chat, the first similar network was set up in 1988) is another way of communicating via Internet. IRC is a global cluster system consisting of a number of servers and its customers. Using the service requires a certain customer program, then a connection to a IRC server (the ones closest to Estonia are located in Finland and Sweden). The system is divided into a number of channels which can be added or deleted at any time. These channels help to organise the chat groups by topics. A channel with a certain name and topic will attract people with similar interests to discuss various issues. A user can monitor different channels simultaneously, and also have private conversations with other IRC-chatters, irrespective of what channels they use.

Additionally, there are several IRC systems with independent server-networks in the world, the most extensive ones are Effnet, Undernet and Talnet.

The line between IRC and a chat room, or talker, is quite thin with respect to its users as well as some specialists. Tiit Rammo argues that a chat room is merely an IRC-service accessible by an ordinary telnet-protocol instead of the IRC customer program (Rammo 1995: 46). However, this is not quite true. As mentioned above, IRC is a global cluster system where all the users of this particular Internet service are connected to each other through the IRC-servers of their choice. A chat room, on the other hand, is located at a certain port of a certain server and is usually not connected to others of its kind. However, establishing a connection to netlink or some other chat room is possible for talkers based on the NUTS-code³, although this is rarely used. An exception to Estonian chat rooms is the Moomin-valley talker based on the EW-Too code, which is constantly connected to a few dozen talkers in different part of the world. Such a netlink or intercom system enables the logged-ins to a local chat room to communicate with the users of other talkers easily without taking an additional username or logging in at another place. This system, however, has not been accepted by chat room users very extensively. The reason is probably the popularity of IRC service for global direct communication. Chat rooms tend to

³) NUTS, EW-Too – MUD or talker programs

retain their locality, and a limited set of users as well as its atmosphere.

There are several different chat rooms with audio-visual capabilities: chat rooms in JAVA-script are spread as www-pages (the chatroom OK in Estonia), 3D and graphical chat rooms are sold as program packages by authorised dealers (Palace-type talkers in Estonia) as well as talkers with sound and even video images. All such specialised talkers require fast communication lines as the transferring of any kind of images or sound requires more resources than that of an ordinary text.

MUD or Multi-User Dungeon (sometimes also Multi-User Devices or Multiple User Dimension) is used for interactive role-play. It enables users to converse in real time just like IRC or chat rooms, but the focus is rather on the game and competition, completing levels and scoring points than on conversation. The whole process of the game is passed on in the form of text.

Apart from "talk" all these means of direct communication are relatively anonymous. Every user decides whether and how much personal information he or she wishes to give by creating a character (slang: *char*) or later in communication. While in oral media it is possible to pass on detailed personal information, for instance, social status, age, sex, condition of health, mood, etc. non-verbally (Pittam 1994), then in written media this information is encoded through semantic and syntactic choices made by the writer. In talkers, IRC and other channels of computer-communication all information and action is passed on in the form of text.

Researchers of human interaction have always been interested in how communication is started, who shows the initiative, which are the most popular opening strategies or greeting formulae. The opening phrase in all multiple user means of direct communication is more or less the same. I would like to discuss some specific examples of these from MoominValley chat room (moomin.ee 2010).

According to researchers of both face-to-face interaction (Laver 1975) as well as computer-mediated communication (Sean Rintel and Pittam 1997: 518) it is almost always the newcomer who starts the conversation. This also applies in most cases when the in-logger found himself in a public room. The entering text can be divided on different basis. Here we could mention inter-

personal purposes, previous experience and the level of acquaintance. In the material on computer-mediated communication it is argued that the established entering procedures are more common than those of leaving, the latter are also shorter (Sean Rintel and Pittam 1997: 526).

The customary procedure is that right after logging in all the persons in the chat room are addressed impersonally (receive the sc. "blind" group greeting). The Estonians use various addressing formulae, their abbreviations or variations: *hei* 'hallo', *tere*, *tre*, *ter* 'good day', *tere kõik* 'hi all', *tere kallid* 'hello, darlings', *re* (in English net-slang: – re-hello or 'hello again'), *hi*, *hõi*, *hai* 'hi'. If the user is acquainted with the others then his server-message and blind greeting is quickly responded to and the communication is enlivened by responsive greetings of much greater variety – starting with the distortion of the newcomer's name (e.g. Evita -> Ävita, Jevita, Evitjushka), followed by the addition of a nickname *mailaav* (transcription of the English 'my love') or the assigning of an original title (*Angel mu vanniheeringas* 'Angel. my bath herring', *Torukmutakso* 'Toruk, my taxi'). New or unfamiliar users receive almost no attention at first.

Smileys and the sc. socials have an important role in greetings and further communication. Completing a sentence with a popular smiley suggests to others present in the room (or the partner in private conversation) whether the speaker smiles, winks his eye, sticks out his tongue, is sad, etc. Thus, traditional gestures are used as means of communication. Socials are direct and definite means of communication, and in order to enliven the conversation their meaning is rendered through the use of various set phrases. These phrases are prone to variation in both group and private conversations. For example, instead of the social "Hiya" those present in the room see the text "X rubs everyone's noses", or in private conversations "X strokes the cheek, rubs the nose and says 'Hi'". The socials are changed usually by one person (the editor of the talker), sometimes this right is extended to the small group of most regular users. The set phrases and sayings of ordinary language, often distorted, are also used.

The parting phrases are more similar to those used in real life, as the body of used expressions in oral speech and ordinary correspondence tend to be brief and concise as well. Because the

thorough parting from many people might take too long then users tend to avoid this by employing short general expressions like *head aega* 'Goodbye' – *daega, paih; leff* referring to the gesture of waiving the hand (*lehvitama*) and other expressions are used for non-verbal communication. Sometimes people log out with no parting notice whatsoever, in such cases it is not certain whether the conversation was dull, the disruption was caused by technical problems or lack of time.

The group of consistent users of one chat room is relatively determined, which does not necessarily mean that these new joiners are rejected. More and more people use Internet and its services, and the means of direct communication are no exception here. If years ago the communication channels were used mainly by those who earned their living or specialised in computers (today referred to as computer geeks), then now its user group consists of people less familiar with computers (the best example according to Muumiorg and other Estonian communication channels might be the recent 'invasion' of policemen, coast guards, medical workers or pager operators).

The novice users of chat rooms find it often difficult to start a conversation, even if they have adopted a figurative or a humorous nickname. The name is the first thing a beginner chooses for himself. The most popular virtual names are the names of a) characters from fiction (the favourite ones seem to be taken from science fiction or children's literature – Pipi, Mio, Lotta, Myy, Zaphod, Marvin); b) characters from movies (Alf, Mulder, Scully, MacGyver); c) pop singers (Madonna, Prince); d) names referring to outward appearance (Piku [The Tall One] who IRL is a tall person); e) real names of persons or nicknames derived from Christian names. At the same time the chosen name and the intended (future) character might not be related at all. The development of the character depends on the behaviour of a certain user and his consistency in staying in the role.

Apparently not all the newcomers enter the chat room with the intention of staying there. It happens quite often that the newcomers try to provoke the reaction of the other users by any means possible – such newcomers behave according to the principle that even negative attention is worth having. Often, they start attracting attention by greeting all the insiders / in-loggers in person (perhaps in hope for entering into conversation with

someone), accuse others of being 'asleep', complain of boredom and accuse others of being boring (*you are so boring, why don't you say anything*, etc). Convinced of the inefficiency of any of these methods they might employ others, some extremely persistent newcomers might simply start using profane language or spam (i.e. the (repeated) spreading of a random text for offensive purposes). The word comes from "Monty Python's Flying Circus," the popular series of sketches shown on BBC during 1969–1974⁴). The latter method is severely reproached by regular users, whose reaction is generally extremely negative and in the case of some super-users certain forms of punishment are employed – restriction on talking, expulsion from the main room or public rooms, expulsion from the talker, blocking the user's name, denial of log-in from the user's server. It is possible that such computer-related strategies for starting up communication that are different from those used by the usual face-to-face interaction have been formed by the slightly more complex circumstances of the opening phase characteristic to computer-mediated communication channels (Sean Rintel and Pittam 1997: 521). People who use such means of communication for the first time find it hard to adapt to the technical side as well as to the fact that they are not acquainted with and cannot see the other users, and that all the non-verbal action has to be passed in the form of text. Part of such behaviour is caused by anonymity – it is thought (and usually it is also true) that "no one will ever know who I am". Still, generally such constantly disturbing behaviour leads to the denying of log-in, as the server that the disruptive individual uses is known anyway.

The regular users of Estonian IRC, talkers and MUDs keep contact by communicating quite lively IRL, outside virtual space, by organising several parties, gatherings, birthdays and other events. The anonymity of the users in this case is not too important. The gatherings of the sc. computer-freaks which have been held for many years now (BBSummer, BBWinter) and the events of the graphical talker Palace.ee have even certain initiation rites for newcomers to their programme (AM). The novice participants of BB-events have to perform certain computer-related

⁴) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spam_\(Monty_Python\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spam_(Monty_Python))

duties, such as for instance act out the nature of a printer, modem or scanner (Liitmaa 1995: 15).

Lately, there have been several discussions about Internet dependency in the press. As Internet is first and foremost a means for acquiring and exchanging information (the means of direct communication are mostly used for similar purposes, except for MUD⁵), then we cannot say that it is any worse than the dependency on radio, television, newspapers or telephones. Those who use Internet as a means of direct communication consider this method of communication the fastest and most informative one. This might also be the reason why these are the means that are being used and enhanced more and more.

Translated by Kait Realo

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AM = *Arvutimaailm*, 7, 1994; 7, 1995. Tallinn.

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⁵) The MUD-type programs are an exception because they focus mainly on the playfulness of the program and, therefore, the dependency of MUDs should be treated the same way ordinary computer games are.

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