

The mistake of convergence

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About Richard Harper

The mobile industry has long been hoping for convergence. In simple terms, the hope is that all types of content – whether it be video telephony, Hollywood movies and everything in between – will be consumable on any device. With convergence, the mobile industry hopes to steal business from the fixed line networks and the broadcast companies. Conversely, with convergence, the PC manufacturers hope to take business from the home entertainment technology suppliers and the mobile industry. On all sides, great sums of money are spent with convergence in mind.

For those of us in research, however, particularly those of us who do "user research", the idea of convergence is quixotic. It is a distraction from explorations of things that might be more salient. This is not to say that we doubt whether people in the future will sometimes want technology to combine different functions, it is just that we think that these combinations might need to be thought through more carefully than is typically the case. It is very rare indeed that users want everything combined in a single device. It is much more often the case that the reverse holds true: users want things separated and simpler, not combined and more complex.

In this essay I will explain why this is so in light of what appears to be evidence that mobile IM is failing. By failure I mean that many commentators and senior strategists in the mobile industry claimed, just two or three years ago, that the

success of IM on the PC would be transferable to mobile devices. Yet now journalistic and anecdotal evidence are suggesting that user reaction to mobile IM has been poor. Why is this? Can we learn from this?

I think we can. I want to suggest that one could have predicted this apparent failure by learning from the fact that, historically, there has not been evidence that communications channels gradually converge. Indeed quite the reverse: there are now more means of communicating than ever. Take the historical evolution of communication technologies in organisational life. What is the role of email? What has it pushed out? What prior forms of communication have converged in it? If there has been convergence, why is paper mail still used? And, given what was noted above about the success of IM in the workplace, why has it not subsumed email?

Text, Email, IM

I don't need to make anything up here. I can turn to a very large literature. Naomi Baron for example noted that if one looks historically at email one can see that it has come to be focused increasingly on communicating organisational discourse: communicating announcements, delivery of reports and memos, and so on. She reports that email will continue to be used for some of the more informal exchanges of information that keep the wheels of an organisation turning – such as micromanagement for example – but that now, fifteen or twenty years after its first introduction, email is being used primarily for what is appropriate for people in their "official positions". Email is the channel that officials of an organisation use to talk to officials elsewhere on topics that include anything and everything that such officials need to talk about: both the official bits, as it were, as well as the informal. But Baron also notes that the evidence shows that as email becomes ever more like this, so it becomes less likely to be used as a channel between close friends within an organisation. Nor is it so likely to be used for friendships that cross organisational limits. Rather, channels like SMS or IM are beginning to be used for these purposes. Why would this be?

<http://www.american.edu/lfs/tesol/baronhome.htm>
Baron's homepage

Baron herself does not offer any insights into this, her focus being primarily email, but in a book I have recently co-edited called "The Inside Text: Social perspectives on SMS", various researchers have shown that SMS is used for close companionships. This is for the following sorts of reasons: it offers

intimacy, for example, since it is delivered to the hand (indeed, some go so far as to argue that this intimacy is almost physical); SMS content affords privacy too (given the size of the screen on hand-held devices); and finally SMS supports real time connectivity not simply because it is sent and received at any time, anywhere, (after all it is a push rather than a pull medium, as with email) but because users will deal with an SMS when it arrives. Users let SMS interrupt them, whereas they 'triage' their email (thus responding when they have time rather than on delivery). It is these sorts of properties (and others too, of course) that result in texting being a good tool for close friendship, for intimacy.

<http://www.springeronline.com/sgw/cda/frontpage/0,11855,3-40109-22-37344962-0,00.html>
The Inside Text, Springer

Now it could be suggested that some, if not all, of these needs could be supported by email. What the evidence is showing, however, is that users have leveraged the unique properties of SMS, just as they have with email, so that each medium gets used for different things. These differences reflect what each medium has come, with the passing of time and the development of human habit, to afford. By this I mean that a channel comes to be used according to how the hands, the eyes, the mind and the technology in question *interact*. Thus the result is that to be good at work, people email, to be good at friendship, they text.

Needless to say, this argument, though seemingly clear, requires some careful handling. Given what has been argued about text, then one might suggest that another medium actually is thriving that is already offering much of what we are claiming text currently does: namely IM. Indeed, it is now commonly argued in the literature that IM allows the bonds of close friends within an organisation to emerge and be sustained and that this is done whilst other patterns of relationship, more formal and organisational, are being sustained by email. But, in fact, SMS and IM do different things, supporting different aspects of friendships, in different contexts, in different ways. They afford different things.

For instance, one of the properties of IM is that it is undertaken when at a keyboard, and when one is already logged on to a networked PC. Thus, it allows and indeed turns on the use of rapid typing skills. IM is essentially a very rapid form of textual communication. IM messages also arrive on screens that are, typically, large. Now, on both counts, SMS is distinct. Texting is slow and awkward to do, it being a form of data entry that is cumbersome. But this is not necessarily a disadvantage. One beneficial consequence of this is that when texts are composed, the difficulty of doing so encourages composition to be more thoughtful than when textual expression is created through IM.

This does not mean that texts are formal, but that their form, their linguistic shape if you will, is distinct, certainly different from that composed with IM. The size of screen of hand-held devices means that the kinds of things said in texts can be more private, more intimate, as we noted above, and this again distinguishes text from what one would want to say over IM. As it happens, these particular properties of texts result in many texts having personal gift-like qualities.

<http://journals.kluweronline.com/article.asp?PIPS=5092673>
Harper on gift-giving between mobile phone users (PDF)

Beyond digital

What is being implied is that the future will offer more variations in terms of means of communication and patterns of communication. The dimensions we have been exploring have related on the one hand to what one might call "worker-to-worker" patterns, and on the other to "person-to-person" patterns. We are arguing that the former pattern is supported with email – it being formal, official and, without being unkind, sterile – while the latter pattern is supported with text – it being personal, expressive, tender, yet, and again without wanting to be unkind, artful.

Our view (indeed we would like to say "what the evidence shows") is that just as these two types of communication technology will continue to exist and indeed will find their relative role more clearly defined, so too will other means of communicating. The reason why there will be a proliferation and not a condensing of communications channels is that most channels have unique properties and users have a knack of identifying the useful aspects of these properties. They not only adopt these but often adapt their own practices to suit. In other words, there is a relationship between what technologies can do or *afford*, as it is put in the scientific literature, and the evolution of human habit.

If the fate of email, IM and text is anything to go by, then the moral would seem to be that people adopt new technologies to expand their communication repertoire rather than to reduce it. In other words, they don't seek or try and create convergence, they do the opposite: they seek and create more ways of doing things, more methods of expression, not fewer.

If one follows this argument through, one is left with a vision in which there is an infinite number of channels of communication. Does this sound plausible? In its exaggerated form clearly not; there must be some kind of threshold beyond which users are not willing to go. After all, how many hands do they have, how

many pockets, how many channels can users deal with? There is also the fact that even when users do like a particular channel they can be weaned off it - after all, what is the budget given to marketing departments for if not for this task? The point is that the idea of convergence - the topic of this essay - seems odd, misguided, and just plain curious given the historical evidence. Why does the mobile industry focus on it? Why does it plan for it? Those of us whose trade is looking at and understanding people know that what they want is a future where they can do more, not less. Our studies demonstrate clearly that people want technologies to help them express themselves in new and ever richer ways. This does not mean that they want to be overloaded, of course. A balance needs to be sought. But for them, convergence seems like a very bad idea indeed: it is like holding out the promise that technology will reduce their senses and dull their experiences by constraining what they can do. That's why the hope of convergence is a mistake; that's why I think it important that the mobile industry learns from the fate of mobile IM.

<http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/ni/futuremobile/socialaspects/MobileHCI-Final.pdf>
Harper on the evolution of mobile technology (PDF)

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