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From lecture hall to city council:
Twitter as subordinate involvement in formal settings
by Judith Bündgens-Kosten and Annabell Preußler

Abstract

The micro–blogging service Twitter can be used to publicly share information about events that used to be limited to a defined number of participants only. How does this affect different types of formal or semi–formal events, from the university seminar to the council meeting? This paper uses Goffman's notion of *involvement* and Lindroth and Bergquist's notions of *alignment* and *glancing* to describe the potential for conflict that this use of Twitter causes, and suggests approaches that may help to avoid or to alleviate conflicts.

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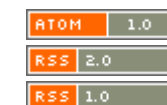
1. Introduction

Before the advent of mobile computing, 'closed doors' meant truly 'closed doors'. Whether you explained reading assignments in a university classroom, debated road repairs in a city council, or presented research results at a conference: only those co-present could listen, comment, debate, criticize, compliment. Those not co–present were literally and metaphorically 'outside', excluded from gaining information about what was going on inside, and from contributing to it as well.

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Twitter, amongst other tools, has changed this. Microblogging allows co–present participants to share what is going on with others, and gives those not present the opportunity to take this information and to react to it, be it by re–tweeting a funny observation, directing questions at co–present participants, or by starting what is colloquially known as 'shitstorm.'

How does this fact change formerly 'closed door' events? What conflicts can arise from this fact, and how may they be reduced or even avoided? Using two different conflict scenarios, we will discuss different views on Twitter use in these 'closed door' events, and attempt to explain arising conflicts by reference to Goffman's notions of the *fully–focused gathering* and of *involvement*, as well as to Lindroth and Bergquist's notions of *alignment* and *glancing*. Can these notions help to explain or predict conflicts, or lead to suggestions for avoiding or reducing conflicts surrounding Twitter use in these contexts?

1.1. Twitter and Twitter use

Twitter, launched in 2006, is currently the most popular microblogging provider, with more than 200,000,000 active users [1]. Microblogs, a typical Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) application, function similar to blogs, but posts are much shorter (a posting is limited to 140 characters or similar) and do not contain headlines, although metadata, *e.g.*, about location and time of posting, may be added (see Figure 1). These messages can be addressed to a specific person or to a general audience — and they are usually public. Similar to blogs, the posts — called 'tweets' — are displayed in reverse chronological order on a user's main page. This microblogging service can be accessed via the Twitter Web site, by using mobile text messages, desktop clients or third party applications, including apps for smartphones and tablet PCs.

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Figure 1: A sample tweet.

Twitter is used in a number of ways. Java, *et al.* (2007) and Simon and Bernhardt (2008) suggest that most people use Twitter in order to publish links, report news or simply to chat with others.

The building and maintenance of networks is also facilitated by Twitter. Users can 'follow' each other and thus add one another to their social network. To 'follow' someone implies that the recent posts of this user are included in one's timeline, a display of current messages in reverse chronological order on the starting page. This way, users can become part of a network consisting of people with similar interests who exchange information with each other. Furthermore, it can satisfy users' curiosity about other people (friends, family and colleagues, as well as public figures) and function as a tool for self–promotion. In that sense, Twitter is a social network that caters to the human need for social acceptance (Kerres and Preußler, 2009). Access to 'pure' — not socially embedded or socially filtered information — can be more effectively realized by other means, so that Twitter's strength lies in its social networking aspects, which reflect social relations of users.

A number of studies has looked at how Twitter is used in political discourse (Shogan, 2010; Waters and Williams, 2011; Burns and Eltham, 2009; Welpe, *et al.*, 2009; Saalfeld and Dobmeier, 2012), advertising/PR (Schultz, *et al.*, 2011), education (Junco, *et al.*, 2011; Schroeder, *et al.*, 2010; Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009; Ebner and Maurer, 2008; Pauschenwein and Sfiri, 2011; Borau, *et al.*, 2009), science and science communication, including conference tweeting (Mandavilli, 2011; Kieslinger, *et al.*, 2011; Herwig, *et al.*, 2009; Reinhardt, *et al.*, 2009; Harley, *et al.*, 2010) among others (*e.g.*, Puotinen, 2011).

Generally speaking, the literature on Twitter use focuses on who tweets what, rather than on the *situation* in which tweets are sent. Only the research on conference tweeting poses an exception here. A tweet, though, is always situated in the sense that it is written in a very specific context, at a specific place and point of time, and this context and the social constrains that govern it influence any tweeting activity originating from it.

In this paper, the focus will lie on a specific type of context: Tweeting in formal and semi–formal settings, as exemplified by lectures and council meetings. We will argue that a number of conflicts can arise when Twitter is introduced into these settings.

1.2. Conflicts about Twitter use

The advent of mobile Internet has triggered a number of changes in how media and technology are used and created the need for a (re)negotiation of behavioural standards in a number of contexts. The improving 'hotspot' infrastructure in many cities enables convenient Internet access for laptop users. It has become increasingly easy and commonplace to access Web sites or to use online services via apps with 3G or 4G smartphones. The rise of tablet PCs has furthered this development even more. Social software can be used any time, any place. Updating Facebook or sharing what one is doing via Twitter is not an activity exclusively done at one's home or office. This, in turn, has opened the door to conflicts surrounding the use social software tools such as Twitter in those contexts in which they were not previously present.

In this section, we will look in detail at two incidents where use of Twitter led to explicit conflict, one from a university context, the other from a political/administrative context. We will discuss how different stakeholders interpreted these conflicts, and which attempts at resolving them were undertaken.

The first incident took place in New York in 2008. A journalism student (AT) used different channels to discuss a class she was taking, including blogging (in a class blog and a personal blog) and tweeting about it. She also wrote an article (guest blog post) for PBS's Mediashift about her critique

of the class, in which she included information about her class–related media use, *e.g.*, critical tweets sent during class or in class breaks (live tweeting). The events following the publication of this guest blog post are outlined in a follow–up blog post by the usual author of the Mediashift blog (MG), in which he quotes a number of stakeholders and experts. From this follow–up article, we learned that the teacher of this class (MQ) was offended by her student's sharing of class–related experiences, and established class rules for communicating during class and about the class.

The second incident is situated in the political arena. In 2011, a conflict arose at the city council of a medium–sized western German city over the use of Twitter in council sessions. Some council members had used the microblogging service to report about and comment on ongoing debates. The local press quoted council members criticizing the lack of focus on the session itself, and the social inappropriateness of tweeting during sessions. Conflict also arose over the question whether Twitter was the appropriate way to create public participation (as opposed to people attending the session themselves). This conflict resulted in an agreement on rules that limited Twitter use by representatives during sessions, without touching tweeting about political issues outside of council sessions.

These two conflicts share a number of features. First, communication and the exchange of information and ideas is essential to both contexts. Also, both contexts have traditionally been examples of settings dominated by face–to–face interaction and a clear–cut role attribution (*e.g.*, 'lecturer', 'student', 'council member', 'audience member'), as well as well–defined behaviours attributed to each role. In addition, both are characterized by a clear delineation of participants and non–participants (enforced by 'closed doors') and by fairly formal or even very formal regulations for turn–taking. It can be assumed that identity management or protecting one's reputation plays an important role too, both for academics/future academics (especially in a 'public' subject such as journalism) and for politicians. Of course, the domains — education on the one hand, politics/administration on the other — differ, as does the overall cultural context (USA — Germany).

■ ─────────────────────────────

2. Two incidents

Both incidents received media attention, the first one mostly online, the second one in the local press. Documents stemming from this media attention have been used to reconstruct the first incident [2]. In the case of the second incident, which was more recent, key participants were identified through press reports and contacted. Two individuals (members of the city council, both male, belonging to different political parties) agreed to be interviewed via phone, in a semi–structured interview format. The interview guidelines have been included in the Appendix.

The data for both incidents differs in several regards. The two articles on which the discussion of the first incident is based, were written by (a) a person involved in the classroom incident (AT); and, (b) a person not personally involved in the classroom incident itself, but who sponsored the publication of the original article as a guest blog post (MG), thereby indirectly playing part in the online dimensions of the incident. All individuals involved are identified by name in these articles. For the second incident, we use interview data from individuals directly involved in the council hall incident. Both individuals were also engaged in the media–based aspects of the incident, *e.g.*, by talking to the press. Anonymity was guaranteed, therefore their names are withheld here, and any newspaper sources that inform the analysis are presented only in abridged and translated form without identifying the exact source.

We do not attempt to identify those 'responsible' for conflicts, nor to identify the 'facts' of these incidents as an objective outside observer might have noted them. Rather, we take these documents, articles/blog posts and interviews alike, as subjective *constructions* of those conflicts. How did stakeholders *perceive* these situations? Which aspects are considered problematic by those involved? Where conflicting versions of these incidents emergence from the sources discussed, this will be noted, but no attempt at reconciling them or at pointing out an assumed objective version will

be made. We do, though, take quotes of individuals in blog posts or newspaper articles as indicators of personal constructions and opinions of the individuals so quoted.

In the following section, we will present the data in more detail and discuss it in the light of Goffman's notions of the fully–focused gathering and the role of involvement.

2.1 Twitter and the fully–focused gathering

A council meeting and a lecture constitute, usually, a "*fully–focused gathering*" [3], that is all individuals present in the situation are also included in the encounter. Unlike two friends chatting on the bus, there are no bystanders in a lecture or city council setting who are not sharing this encounter [4]. Not all gatherings are fully–focused. A counterexample would, for example, be a group of friends talking at the market place. In a fully–focused gathering, at the same time as everybody present in the situation is included in the encounter, everybody *not* present in the situation is excluded from the encounter.

Ubiquitous computing, and ubiquitous sharing via Twitter or other social software, can blur the boundaries of gatherings, though. Through Twitter individuals not physically present in the situation can participate — in a fairly limited way — in the encounter. They can, so to say, 'overhear' what is going on in the gathering, and may respond by retweeting, @messages, etc. to the information they receive [5].

Sharing experiences made in fully–focused gatherings is not, in itself, something new. During a city council meeting, for example, the press may attend to report about the event later. And once a council meeting or a lecture are over, individuals might discuss the gathering with non–participants. In both cases, communication about the event will take place after the event, though, and follow fixed conventions (as in the press report case), or be limited in range (as in the talking about the event case).

This in itself can be a source of conflict. In the interviews with council members, the public nature of tweeting from a fully–focused gathering was addressed by both interviewees, but with opposing evaluations. While interviewee 1 welcomed this extension of access, interviewee 2 was concerned about it.

> Interviewee 1: Es gibt nicht mehr Öffentlichkeit, sondern es gibt niedrigschwelligere Öffentlichkeit und dadurch würden Leute, die im Moment einfach die Möglichkeit nicht haben in die Ratssitzungen in persona zu besuchen, die werden dann zusätzlich dazu kommen. Sofern gibt es dann wiederum schon mehr Öffentlichkeit, aber in der gleichen Zielgruppe, also das heißt die Bürgerinnen und Bürger der Stadt. Vielleicht andere Aspekte dieser Zielgruppe, nämlich auch jüngere Leute oder Menschen die ans ans Bett gebunden sind aus irgendwelchen Gründen aber eben nicht, ich sage mal, falsche Öffentlichkeit [6].
>
> [There isn't more public access, but access of a lower threshold, and this would give people who currently do not have the option of attending council sessions, they would come in addition (to those who currently attend). Insofar there would be more openness, but for the target group, *i.e.*, the citizens of the city. Perhaps other aspects of the target group, including younger people and people bedridden for some reasons, but not, let's say, the wrong public.]
>
> Interviewee 2: Also, Tuscheln ist insofern etwas anderes

weil zwei Teilnehmer der selben Veranstaltung der Veranstaltung den Rücken kehren, sie stören oder eine Meinung darüber austauschen, ja. Jetzt ist das aber bei Twitter ist das anders, sondern sie tragen ganz bewußt ein Meinungsbild nach außen und diskutieren das mit Externen, die nicht an der Veranstaltung teilnehmen, kommentieren Auftritte von Kollegen, wo die nicht zu Stellung nehmen können. Und das ist was anderes als wenn ich unter vier Augen tuschel oder eine Meinung sage.

[Interviewee 2: Well, whispering with your neighbour is something else because two participants of the same event turn away from it, disrupt it, or exchange an opinion about it. But with Twitter that's something different, they consciously carry their opinion to the outside and discuss it with external people who do not participate in the event, comment on the performance of colleagues who cannot respond to this. And that's different from me whispering with somebody else or stating an opinion.]

Similar conflicts can arise in teaching contexts. For many learners and teachers, the classroom is a protected space. Both the teacher, potentially exposed to public scrutiny [7], as well as the student, may feel uncomfortable about this. "Dabei stellt sich durchaus die grundlegende Frage, inwieweit Lernen die Öffentlichkeit des Internet 'erträgt'. Lernen heißt (auch), Fehler machen.

(…) Wird das Internet (…) als Raum für aktives Lernen genutzt, hinterlassen die Aktivitäten Spuren, die praktisch nicht löschbar und zunehmend den Personen unmittelbar zuordbar sind. Und dies ein Leben lang." [This raises quite fundamental questions about how learning 'bears' the public nature of the Internet. Learning (also) means making mistakes. (…) If the Internet is used as a space for active learning, activities leave traces that, in effect, cannot be deleted, and which can, increasingly, be directly attributed to specific individuals. And that for a lifetime.] [8] MG quotes the concerns of a assistant professor and colleague of AQ: "I have taught classes in which the tenor of conversation could have changed drastically if a student were to announce that she were going to blog about it, (…) For example, in a media ethics course we talked about naming the accused in rape cases but not the alleged victim. This, as you can imagine, led to a very contentious debate, because false accusations can ruin a life and career. In a classroom you are safe to express unpopular opinions but you probably wouldn't do it if you felt it would end up on a blog post somewhere." For many learners, the opportunity to voice controversial opinions, and to 'test' different positions regarding a complex issue, may require a certain degree of privacy.

2.2. Twitter as subordinate involvement

Lindroth and Bergquist (2010) studied the use of laptops in university classrooms and suggest that Goffman's notion of involvement can fruitfully be applied to such contexts. We argue that it is equally useful for understanding conflicts about Twitter use at formal events such as lectures or seminars, conferences or council meetings.

Goffman defines involvement as "the capacity of an individual to give, or withhold from giving, his concerted attention to some activity at hand — a solitary task, a conversation, a collaborative work effort. It implies a certain admitted closeness between the individual and the object of involvement, a certain overt engrossment of the part of the one who is involved. Involvement in an activity is taken to express the purpose or aim of the actor." [9] He distinguishes involvement along two dimensions. On the one hand, involvement can be either main or side involvement, on the other hand it can be dominating involvement or subordinate involvement. The distinction between main and side is that of degree of required attention, while the distinction between dominating and subordinate depends on which involvement is given primacy in a specific setting: "A main involvement is one that absorbs the major part of an individual's attention and interest, visibly forming the principle current determinant

of his actions. A side involvement is an activity that an individual can carry on in an abstracted fashion without threatening or confusing simultaneous maintenance of a main involvement." [10] A "dominating involvement is one whose claims upon an individual the social occasion obliges him to be ready to recognize; [and] a subordinate involvement is one he is allowed to sustain only to the degree, and during the time, that his attention is patently not required by the involvement that dominates him. Subordinate involvements are sustained in a muted, modulated, and intermittent fashion, expressing in their style a continuous regard and deference for the official, dominating activity at hand." [11]

In a lecture, one might argue, listening to the teacher constitutes the dominating and main involvement, while drinking a cup of tea or doodling on one's notepad are subordinate and side involvements. Often, as in this example, main involvements are also dominating involvements, but this is not necessarily always the case. For example, a dominating involvement may consist of automatized behaviours or require extended periods of waiting/idleness, so that participants can divert most of their attention to an activity that is not the dominating activity — but that they will interrupt once the dominating involvement makes additional claims on their attention [12]. Most attention may then be on chatting with a colleague (main involvement, subordinate involvement), while the 'real reason' for being in the situation is the work currently being done (dominating involvement, side involvement). In a lecture situation, automatized activities only constitute a minor portion of what is going on, but occasional interruptions happen (*e.g.*, because the lecturer needs to fix a technical problem), which then allow individuals to engage in a main activity (such as talking to one's neighbour), under the condition that this activity is interrupted as soon as the lecture requires attention again. Figure 2 illustrates these different scenarios.
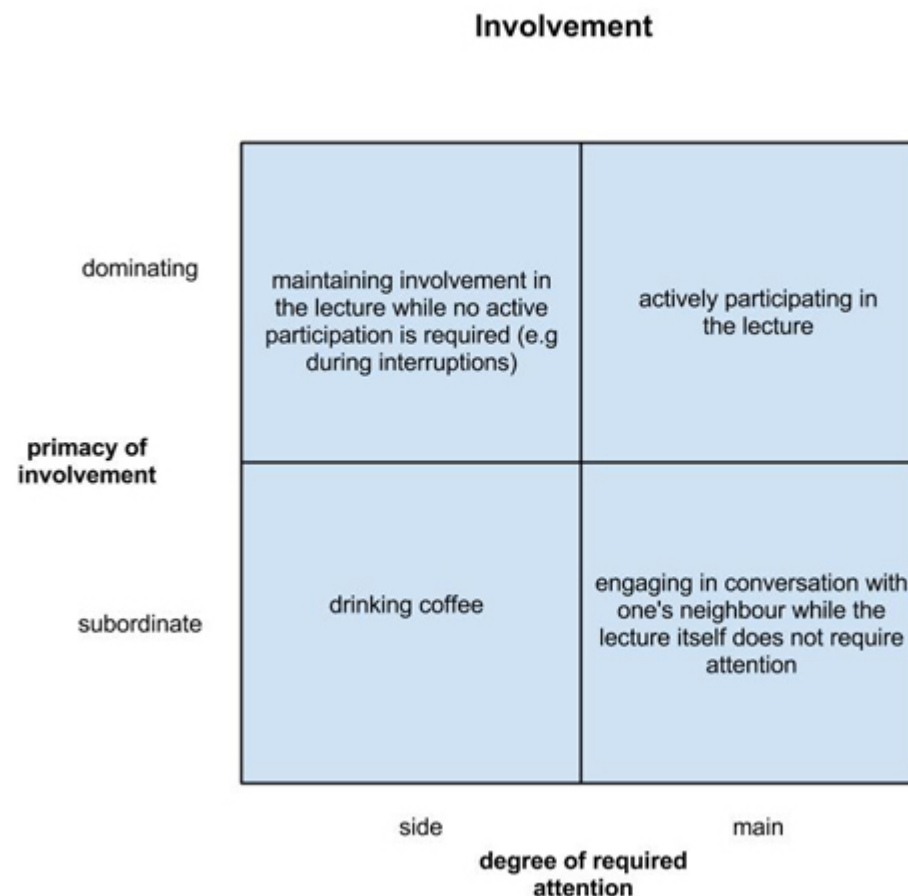
Involvement

Figure 2: Types of involvement.

The type of involvement can change during an event, so that what was a side involvement can develop into a main involvement, and even the dominating activity can change. For a drastic example, imagine a medical emergency occurring during a lecture. Since what 'ought' and 'ought not' be awarded dominating involvement status in a specific type of gathering is conventionalized within a society or specific social grouping, this potential for change of involvement holds potential for conflict: "(…) these involvements [subordinate involvements, addition by the authors] will be a constant threat to obligatory behaviour, ever ready to absorb more of the individual's concern that [sic] is felt proper. (…) This is especially the case with involvements well established as subordinate side ones, since these involvements, defined and described as 'minor' in everyday terms, will never be entirely prohibited in the situation, and hence a few will always be available as beginning points for defection." [13]

These notions, previously applied by Lindroth and Bergquist to the context of laptop use in lectures, can also be used to better understand the potential for conflict when Twitter is used in different face–to–face contexts. For example, the teacher involved in the journalism lecture conflict, MQ, is quoted in the blog post by MG as stating in an e–mail message to him:

> "I will confirm that I asked the class not to text, email or make cell phone calls *during class*. It's distracting to both me and other students, especially in a small class seated around a conference table. This has always been my policy, and I would hazard a guess that it's the policy of many professors no matter the discipline.
>
> However, I did say *after the class* session they were free to text, Twitter, blog, email, post on Facebook or whatever outlet they wanted about the course, my teaching, the content, etc. And, because much of the subject matter of this course relates to them and their Gen Y experiences I would not be surprised if they did. At this point, as a course requirement, they all have blogs."

This statement can be interpreted as a discussion of the appropriateness of certain side involvements in a specific type of gathering: "a small class seated around a conference table". The teacher states that these types of behaviour are "distracting", *i.e.*, challenge the dominating involvement, not only of the person texting, e–mailing, tweeting, blogging or updating a social networking site, but for all other co–present individuals [14].

In the conflict about tweeting at city council meetings, the press quoted council members stating that people should, in their opinion, focus on the council session, not on new media, or that the "culture of the city council" involves discussion and listening, and that sitting in front of a screen and communicating with individuals not present contradicts the purpose of the council.

Not everybody shares this perspective, though. For one thing, opinions on what exactly constitutes the dominating main involvement might differ. For example, one may claim that the dominating main involvement of a lecture consists entirely of listening to the lecturer. Lindroth and Bergquist assume, based on interviews with students, that during a lecture, the dominating involvement typically/ideally is "to listen to the teacher and focus upon the lecturing which also can include asking questions or reflecting upon questions posed by the lecturer" [15], while the subordinate behaviour may consist of "draw doodles in a notebook, (…) taking notes or checking her calendar" [16]. Alternatively, a lecture could also be framed as a situation in which people meet to learn things with support from the lecturer. In such a case, many additional activities such as taking notes or looking up definitions online might also fall under the dominating involvement. What constitutes the dominating involvement is based on social conventions which may differ between groups. Depending on one's definition of what the dominating involvement encompasses, a behaviour might be seen as threatening or as supporting the 'mission' of the gathering.

A statement from Interviewee 1 may illustrate how this relates to Twitter use. He compares his tweeting activities with having a side conversation with a person sitting next to him:

> Interviewee 1: Irgendwo zwischen "Banknachbarn" und "Tasse Kaffee". Insofern als dass ich natürlich selber etwas sage, so wie ich es zum Nachbarn tun würde. Aber beim Nachbarn lasse ich mich ja auf meinen Gesprächspartner ein und höre dann auch zu, was er sagt und bin dadurch abgelenkt. Das ist bei der bei der beim Twittern nicht so, da ist es eher wie ein Gespräch mit demjenigen führen, der gerade die die die Rede inne hat. Also ich höre genau zu was gesagt wird und versuche daraus die die Essenz in in wenigen Wor… Zeichen, in 140 Zeichen, ins Internet zu stellen.

> Interviewer: Also auch wenn Sie nicht mit demjenigen grade reden, der die Rede hält, partizipieren sie quasi mit demjenigen, der grade redet.
>
> Interviewee 1: Ja. Stärker, stärker als wenn ich zum Beispiel gerade eine Zeitung lese. Weil ich dann einfach umso genauer zuhören muß, weil ich ja die Essenz der Worte, so wie ich sie verstehe, rausdestillieren muss.
>
> [Interviewee 1: Somewhere between "talking to somebody sitting next to me" and "[drinking] a cup of coffee". Insofar that of course I'm saying something, as I would when talking to somebody sitting next to me. But when talking to somebody next to me, I get involved with the person I am talking to and listen to what he says, and this diverts my attention. But this is not the case with tweeting, there it's more like me having a conversation with the person having the floor. That is, I listen very carefully to what is being said and try to put the essence of this in 140 characters onto the Internet.
>
> Interviewer: So even when you're not talking to the person who is holding the speech, you are in a way participating with the person talking?
>
> Interviewee 1: Yes, more than if I were, for example, reading a newspaper. Because I need to listen more carefully, because I need to distil from it the essence of the words as I understand them.]

He argues that Twitter does not take focus away from the council meeting, or, more precisely, from listening to the on–going speech, but instead requires additional attention. You have to listen carefully in order to be able to tweet about it. When tweeting about a speech, you, in a way, talk to the person who is speaking. For interviewee 1, therefore, tweeting about a talk is a way to engage in the dominating involvement.

2.3. Glancing, alignment and access

Even if we assumed that for many individuals a lecture were about engaging with the ideas and concepts introduced by the lecturer, this would not mean that engaging with them through technology is uncontroversial. Many tools, not only electronic ones, can be used both for the dominating and for a number of subordinate involvements. You can use a notepad and a pencil, a laptop or a tablet PC to make study notes and to share what you are learning, to doodle or to play FarmVille. Some tools may be associated strongly with side involvements, such as a cell phone or smartphone. The technology used also determines, to a certain degree, the role alignment and glancing can play [17].

Lindroth and Bergquist (2010), in their study on laptop use in university classes, suggest that "glancing", or the simple act of looking at each others' laptop screens, plays an important role in that setting: "Glancing has equivalence in the analogue world. Sneak peeking on a nearby sitting student's notes has several implications for learning. It is a way to easily gather notes if one is lacking concentration. But it can also be seen as a way to make sense of what is going on: if the others are taking similar notes I can't be wrong. Glancing with a laptop makes it possible to elaborate on this practice (…)." [18]

When a student or a member of the city council accesses Twitter via their laptops, glancing — of course always depending on factors such as seating arrangements — can occur as described by

Lindroth and Bergquist. Some co–present individuals, those seated next to or behind a Twitter user, can see that Twitter is being used, and may even be able to gather some additional detail (*e.g.*, username, who is being followed, current tweets in the timeline, tweets being written by the laptop user, etc.). On the other hand, when Twitter is accessed via small hand–held instruments such as smartphones, glancing is effectively undermined. In order to gather sufficient information, a person would need to lean over conspicuously and have a direct look at the small screen — mere glancing will not do [19]. In such settings it becomes impossible to identify how the ongoing activity ties in with the dominating involvement.

According to Lindroth and Bergquist, a subordinate involvement can be either aligned or not aligned to the dominating activity, in the sense of "how it aligns to the lecture by its means or goals and its relation the dominant involvement" [20]. They argue that some subordinate involvements are aligned to the dominating involvement, *i.e.*, it are "activities [that] take away focus from the lecturer but may still support the students [sic] own learning situation (...). By actively engaging with the content of the lecture directly, while it happens, the students have a richer set of artifacts to analyze after the lecture. Still, from the lecturers perspective, it may be somewhat disturbing not to know what the activities behind the screens are about." [21] Examples include "Surfing Wikis, searching for articles relevant for the actual lecture for later use", "Sharing URL:s [sic] and articles with other students", "Taking lecture notes", "Sharing lecture notes and drawings of the white board content between students", and "Asking other students questions regarding the lecture via Instant Messaging." [22]

What Lindroth and Bergquist call aligned subordinate activities may also be viewed as part of the dominating activity by those individuals who consider learning to be the essence of a lecture, or debating ideas the essence of a city council meeting, independent of the form this takes. Even for individuals who have a more restricted notion of the current dominating activity, though, the relationship between these subordinate activities and the dominating activity itself is transparent. For a lecturer it may make a difference whether a student reduces the amount of focus invested into listening to the on–going lecture in order to check e–mail messages, or in order to look up a definition of a term just used on Wikipedia.

When glancing is possible, fellow students can identify whether a person's side activities are aligned or not aligned (or part of the dominating involvement, for that matter). When glancing is not possible, the degree of involvement or alignment of a person and his/her activities becomes difficult to judge. It is of interest in this context that the traditional seating arrangements in lectures and seminars usually exclude the teacher from glancing.

Some statements made by a non–tweeting interviewee from the medium–size city council may be interpreted as reflecting problems related to a lack of glanceability.

> Interviewee 2: Ja, das ist, einfach, die Störung entsteht
> nicht durch durch Lärm im Saal sondern eben dadurch, dass
> sie ich sage jetzt mal den Leuten die Möglichkeit der
> Teilnahme entziehen, und zwar in einem großen Maße.
>
> [Interviewee 2: Well, simply, the disturbance isn't due to
> noise in the council hall, but due to taking away from
> people, let's say, the opportunity to participate, and this on
> a large scale.]

Co–present individuals may assume that another person is tweeting (if this person is known to be an avid Twitter user) without knowing what this person is tweeting about. This can go beyond questions of involvement: The interviewee is both concerned about not *knowing* what is going on, and about not being able to *respond* to what is going on. This way, it becomes a problem of access.

> Interviewee 2: Die Störung ergibt sich dadurch weil parallel

zu der Debatte in der Ratssitzung wird ein Forum kreiert, das nicht allen im Rat zugänglich und transparent ist. Wo im Grunde genommen eine Nebendebatte stattfindet. Und das empfinde ich als störend.

[Interviewee 2: The disturbance arises because a forum parallel to the debate in the council session is being created, which is not accessible and transparent for everybody in the city council. Where, basically, a side debate is taking place. And I consider this to be a disturbance.]

This may be compared to Twitter use in conference settings. The presenter may notice that many individuals are typing on their smartphones, tablet PCs or laptops and assume that they are commenting on his/her presentation, but he/she may be unable to learn what is going on — at least during his/her presentation — and thereby be unable to answer questions or respond to criticism directly. At many conferences, this problem is addressed by the introduction of Twitter walls, which, one may say, formalize glancing. All participants, including the presenter, are able to see the relevant tweets, which makes it easier for all participants to respond to them in some form [23].

3. Conclusion

These conflicts are reminiscent of the debate associated with the introduction of laptops into education, especially higher education (Fried, 2008; Lindroth and Berquist, 2010). The potential to do several things at once, *i.e.*, to multitask, was seen as a risk inherent in laptop use. This can be framed in different ways, *e.g.*, from a cognitive or pedagogic perspective, but also from a more sociological perspective: Laptop use as a threat to the dominating involvement.

Beyond questions of involvement, there is the gradual opening of fully–focused gatherings, and, connected with this, questions of access, both in the sense of access for or openness toward individuals outside the gathering, as well as the ability of participants to know what is being communicated about the gathering during the gathering.

In many countries today, ubiquitous computing is a reality that cannot be ignored, whatever one's preferences in the matter may be. The current trend is toward small and lightweight yet powerful appliances, combined with increasingly fast and affordable mobile Internet connections. The question cannot be *if* digital multitasking is desirable — it is *which form* of digital multitasking we prefer for our classrooms and lecture halls, our council halls or parliaments. While an evaluation of the effects of media use on learning has its place — and current research suggests that some scepticism is warranted — we should move beyond a simple 'yes or no', which has become a mostly hypothetical question. Instead, 'how' is the question we should pose now. In this context, the notion of alignment and the concept of glancing might be useful additions to the on–going discussion.

Goffman [24] stresses the effect of "social groupings" concerning what is and is not situationally appropriate. What appropriate involvement in a lecture or in a council hall comprises might be understood differently by different people. In the college example, the expectations of a teacher clashed with those of the students, or at least one of the students. In the city council example, one person felt like he was engaging people in discussion through Twitter, while another person felt he was excluded from discussion by those who were tweeting.

Explicit conflict can be an opportunity to negotiate standards for specific contexts or within specific social groupings. For teachers who wish to use Twitter and similar tools or technologies in teaching, or for anybody who encounters use of these within formal or semi–formal settings, an explicit negotiation between participants, perhaps resulting in preliminary rules or standards which might then change over time, can be very useful. In both examples presented here, a limited ban on

Twitter use was the result of the renegotiation process. In a council session not open to the public, council members agreed not to tweet during council sessions (tweeting outside of council sessions was not affected by this decision). In the college example, the teacher, MQ, had a face–to–face discussion with AT, adressed the topic in class, and set 'house rules' concerning Twitter use during classes, as well as discussion of class matters outside of class.

AT, the student involved in the second incident, is quoted by MG as describing the discussion in class as follows: "Then she asked, 'You all read Alana's article, what did you think about it?' There was silence for a good 30 or 45 seconds, and it was awkward and weird. And she said, 'OK, we can all agree that there will be no more blogging or Twittering about the class.' It was weird. It seemed like the students were scared to say anything.', expressing scepticism concerning the format and outcomes of the renegotiation process [25]. Such renegotiations can take many forms and must not end in an outright ban of Twitter, though. Alternatives may be decisions like the following:

- To *support glancing*, *e.g.*, through Twitter walls and similar means. This can give access to individuals not using Twitter, and help them to not feel excluded or talked about behind their backs.

- To use Twitter in a structured way, that is, to *make it part of the dominating involvement*. Students may be asked, *e.g.*, to tweet their questions or to make comments on the ongoing lecture via Twitter.

- As an alternative, one may want to *redefine the 'goal' of the gathering*. Is a lecture about listening to the lecturer, or about engaging with the content? Is the purpose of a discussion at a council session to discuss ideas with people present, or to lead a discussion with the community? Depending on the goal of the gathering, certain activities may be in alignment or not in alignment with the dominating involvement/be part of the dominating involvement as one understands it.

These suggestions are no 'one size fits all'. What may be perceived as appropriate and conducive to productive work at a German city council may not fit the needs of the British House of Commons, and what works well in a large lecture hall may not be translated directly to a more intimate group of students. The following questions, though, might guide the process of renegotiation regardless of the specific context:

Fully–focused gathering

- What information is confidential, what information might freely be shared?
- May alternatives to Twitter that allow for more complex privacy settings be a better fit for this context?

Subordinate involvement

- What is the dominating involvement? (This might involve a re–definition of the dominating involvement, *e.g.*, from "listening to the lecture" to "learning about and engaging with a subject")
- What activities are part of or in alignment with this dominating involvement?
- How do participants feel about the subordinate involvements of others? Do they perceive them as hindering their own participation/learning? Why? Which conditions have to be met to make subordinate involvements acceptable? (*e.g.*, short duration, not disturbing others, choice of tool for accessing Twitter) [26]

Alignment, glancing, access

- Are rules that limit non–aligned side activities acceptable to participants? How would such rules be enforced? [27]
- Can access be extended to all participants? How about individuals not using Twitter, or without Internet access during events?
- Can Twitter walls or a similar technology be used to replace or to supplement glancing? How

should the lecturer/presenters react to tweets about him/her or about the content of his/her presentation (directly or later, individually or directed toward the whole group)?

Many of these questions can easily be adapted for other social tools. The conflicts are similar, as are the potential solutions.

3.1. Beyond the medium

"The medium is the message" may be the most famous quote by Marshall McLuhan. But one may safely claim: The medium is not the only message. Many potential conflicts arising from Twitter use are not specific to Twitter, to social networking tools, or even to computer–mediated communication. Statements that violate rules of decorum or standards of fair play will always cause conflict, be they sent via Twitter or communicated in class. As Interviewee 1 put it:

> Interviewee 1: Ich persönlich halte das für für nicht richtig, dass durch Twitter hinter dem Rücken voneinander geredet wird, sondern das ist einfach eine Frage, ob man anständig miteinander umgeht oder nicht, und unterscheide dort stark zwischen dem Medium und der Art wie man übereinander spricht. Das wird allerdings von den Ratskollegen nicht so gesehen, da wird vor allem das Medium kritisiert (…).

> [Interviewee 1: I, personally, don't think that Twitter is used to talk about people behind their backs, that's just a question of whether your deal with each other fairly or not, I differentiate strongly between the medium and the way you talk about each other. The city council colleagues see this differently, though, they mostly criticize the medium (…).]

Or, as expressed in the recommendations of the Procedure Commission of the English House of Commons: "(…) we urge all Members to use their good sense and behave with courtesy, particularly in not tweeting messages which would be disorderly if said in the House." (Knight, 2011, p. 11) 🔳

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Notes

1. According to company information from December 2012 (https://twitter.com/twitter/status/281051652235087872), accessed 4 January 2013.

2. The following documents served as data basis for the first incident: Source 1: http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/09/old-thinking-permeates-major-journalism-school249.html; Source 2: http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/09/nyu-professor-stifles-blogging-twittering-by-journalism-student261.html. In the case of the second incident, since the anonymity of interviewees would be threatened by identifying the town at which the incident took place, no journalistic sources have been included here.

3. Goffman, 1963, p. 91, emphasis in the original.

4. Exceptions are rare, but may include a janitor doing repair work during a lecture (being physically present in the situation/lecture hall, but not participating in the lecture).

5. In a not fully–focused gathering, overhearing is also possible, but social rules mandate that accidental overhearing is not acknowledged — you maintain the illusion that two people having a private conversation do indeed have a *private* conversation.

6. During transcription some dialectal features were eliminated in order to make identification of speakers less likely.

7. *Cf.*, the ongoing discussions and legal disputes in Germany about the legitimacy of teacher rating and professor rating Web sites such as spickmich.de or meinprof.de.

8. Kerres and Preußler, 2009, p. 10.

9. Goffman, 1963, p. 43.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Goffman, 1963, p. 44.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Goffman, 1963, p. 45.

14. This assumption is also reflected in the survey conducted by Fried (2008), in which many students named in–class laptop use of others as a distraction. It is to be asked what aspect of laptop use is perceived as distracting — keyboard and fan noise, changing images on the screen, constant hand movement, the sight barrier a laptop poses, concern about lack of involvement of other students — and if these may be remedied by using smaller and less noisy tools such as tablet PCs.

15. Lindroth and Bergquist, 2010, p. 318.

16. Lindroth and Bergquist, 2010, p. 313.

17. That the choice of tool makes a difference for participants in formal settings is also demonstrated by the report of the British House of Commons Procedure Commission, which concerns potential changes in the policy concerning computer use. While it suggests allowing the use of handheld devices both in the Chamber and during committee meetings (checking e–mail messages and using Twitter are explicitly named as reasons for the use of handheld devices), it also suggests allowing laptops only for committee meetings and for the person currently speaking (at a committee or in the

Chamber) (Knight, 2011). The tool, therefore, seems to indeed make a difference, though the criteria that make one tool preferable over another must be expected to differ between settings.

18. Lindroth and Bergquist, 2010, p. 316.

19. Tablet PCs would lie between these two extremes. While their screens are larger than those of smartphones, their 'glanceability' depends on the angle at which they are held.

20. Lindroth and Bergquist, 2010, p. 317.

21. Lindroth and Bergquist, 2010, p. 318.

22. *Ibid.*

23. While Twitter walls may support glancing and thereby access, they do not guarantee it. Krommer (2011) discusses the problems that may arise when a speaker not acquainted with Twitter or conference tweeting is confronted with a Twitter wall supplementing his/her presentation.

24. Goffman, 1963, p. 46.

25. Please note that the description of the renegotiation process differs in some details between AT and MQ.

26. Note that the recommendations of the British House of Commons Procedure Commission explicitly states that devices should be used "silently" and "in a way that does not impair decorum" (Knight, 2011, p. 2).

27. Some university instructors enforce laptop use rules (*e.g.*, a ban on accessing Facebook during class) by having teaching assistants patrol the lecture hall. If you stand behind a row of students, you can easily see which students are accessing Web sites on their laptops. This kind of regulation is not possible with small–screen computing devices.

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Appendix

Interview guidelines

[Informed consent]

[Begin recording]

Q1: Nutzen Sie Twitter?

Q2a: *Wenn ja*: Auch in Ratssitzungen? Wie? Für welche Zwecke? Wie reagieren andere darauf?

Q2b: *Wenn nicht*: Nutzen andere Twitter in Ratssitzungen? Wie finden Sie das?

Q3: Womit kann man Twitter–Nutzung am ehesten vergleichen? (z.B. Zeitung lesen, oder ein Gespräch mit dem Banknachbarn führen?)

Q4: Stellt Twitter eine Störung des Ablaufs von Ratssitzungen dar? Weshalb? Verändert Twitter die Art, wie Ratssitzungen ablaufen? Wie?

Q5: Was ist "der Sinn"/der Kern/die Hauptaufgabe einer Ratssitzung?

[Stop recording]

Q6: Ich versuche, Menschen mit möglichst verschiedene Positionen zu befragen. Könnten Sie eine oder mehrere Personen benennen, die eine deutlich andere Position vertreten als Sie?

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