

Creating Kairos

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If you are like me, you will have experienced this: the moment when the witty quip, the telling anecdote, the irrefutable argument leaps into your mind... but just too late. The conversation has moved on. Ten seconds ago your quip would have been timely, eliciting smiles and nods from your audience. Now, the topic has shifted, someone else has the floor, and the words and meanings with which your comment would have resonated are too far downstream.

This is kairos — or to be more precise, this is missing kairos. Kairos refers to the opportune moment for action. More particularly, in rhetoric, it refers to the ways in which a situation — the contingencies of a given time and place and audience — determines which words can have an impact, and which can not. The expert speaker is sensitive to the ever-shifting nature of the situation and knows that timing is critical: there is an opportune moment when particular words can be effective and apt.

Kairos has been on my mind because I've been reflecting on social media and its ability to support rich, productive conversation. Over the last twenty years I've designed and studied a wide range of systems that support conversation, and drawn on insights from disciplines such as architecture, ethnomethodology, rhetoric, psychology and sociology. When I encounter instances where media facilitate communication in unexpected ways and conversation flourishes, I try to understand why. And one factor that recurs is that those media enable the creation of kairos.

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To illustrate, I will begin with one of my first insights about conversation. I was the only person dialed into an otherwise face to face meeting of two dozen people. Because the meeting was large, it was highly structured: a chairperson orchestrated the meeting and went around the table asking people to talk, with me getting my turn over the speaker phone. While much was said, there was little discussion and less kairos – that is, though many may have had apt comments at various points, the size and formality of the meeting made seizing the floor at an opportune moment difficult.

As the end of the meeting approached, the chair took a few questions, and then began to conclude the meeting. Normally, at this point, I would have said goodbye, and the chair would have thanked me for dialing in and disconnected me – but kairos was absent, and there was no moment for me to speak. Furthermore, the chair had forgotten I was dialed in. So the meeting ‘ended’ with me still on the speaker phone.

However, it was not quite an ending. From my vantage point on the speaker phone the change in the group interaction was astonishing. It sounded as if everyone in the room burst out talking at once. What had happened was that the meeting had dissolved into small groups, each with a pent up store of issues they wanted to discuss.

The speaker phone I was on, an advanced model designed to triangulate on whoever was speaking at the moment, struggled valiantly with the situation. It would focus on one group’s conversation for a few seconds, and then shift to another and then another. It was like having an out-of-body experience at a cocktail party. Over the course of a minute I sampled a dozen conversations, and was struck by the energy and diversity of the discussions. The fragmentation of the monolithic meeting into small groups created multiple spaces for conversation. Kairos was abundant. It made me realize that the most valuable product of a meeting may not be what happens *during* the meeting, but what happens *just after*.

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Among the first social media sites I studied was an online community called “Cafe Utne.” Cafe Utne was a web-based bulletin board system that enabled its users to create topics, within which they could carry on long, linear textual conversations. I had become interested in a topic that was devoted to a limerick game. The game was to make limericks, one line at a time, one line per person. By the time I found the limerick game, it had been going steadily for a year—in notable contrast to most other topics that would begin robustly but then die down after a few weeks or months. The limerick game had developed a number of informal rules, one being that once started a limerick was not to be interrupted – that is, a bit of stray conversation in the middle would disrupt the visual continuity of the limerick. As a consequence, those participating in the game would wait for a limerick to end, and then there would be a little burst of conversation: lauding of clever lines, jokes about forced rhymes, social chat, and so forth. Then someone would start a new limerick, and conversation would cease until, five posts later, the limerick came to an end.

Two observations struck me. One was the way in which the limerick game created transient spaces in which conversation could occur. The second was that what transpired before the space appeared — during the generation of the limerick — provided the grist for the subsequent conversation. Overall, the game created a rhythm: spaces where conversation was inhibited and conversational potential was generated, followed by spaces where kairos was present.

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In the early 00's I studied an internal IBM system called Rendezvous. Subsequently re-christened IBM Enhanced Audio Conferencing, a more descriptive if less compelling name, it was a VoIP-based system for conference calls. One of its notable aspects was that, if you were using the system from a computer, it would display a representation of the call — dots with text labels arranged around a table — that showed who was dialed into the call, what their names were, and who was speaking at the moment. You could do a number of other things, but what proved to be particularly useful was that you could select any person in the meeting — even complete a stranger — and start a private textual chat.

The ability to easily have a private chat during a conference call proved surprisingly useful. As those who participate in conference calls know, a drawback of the medium is that it is cumbersome to interrupt. With private text chat, a new, non-interruptive channel was created. It was now possible, without interrupting, to prompt the speaker to address a topic, pose a question, or address a side comment to another listener. It turns out that conference calls are full of kairos, once there is a non-intrusive way for people to speak to one another.

This example brings up another aspect of kairos. While the timing of one's words is critical, they will fail to have an impact unless they resonate with the audience. Thus, in a conventional conference call, kairos is limited both by the difficulty of interrupting, and by the fact that one's remarks are addressed to everyone on the call. With the ability of text chat to privately address a single person — and thus tailor the remark to an individual rather than the group — kairos is multiplied. There is no longer one audience, there are many, and the opportunities for impactful speech are increased.

Private chat affords a more personal and often candid exchange among individuals, opening up a new level of conversation as one-to-one chats occur at the same time as the group conversation. This is not an unalloyed good, of course. The additional level of conversation that affords kairos may prove

disruptive. Kairos is not about good conversation *per se*, it is about words having impact, and it is as friendly to the perfectly timed bit of snark as it is to the telling observation that brings needed clarity to a group discussion.

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In the late 00's I came across a web site that has continued to interest me for years: PepysDiary. It is named after Samuel Pepys, a prominent figure of 17th Century London society who is now remembered primarily for the diary he kept. The diary contains day-by-day accounts of notable events like the arrival of the Plague and the Great Fire of London, intermixed with the mundane accounts of his daily life and his encounters with everyone from the rich and famous to shopkeepers and servants.

PepysDiary looks like a blog, although the real action appears in the comments section. Every day the PepysDiary site publishes Pepys' 'latest' entry – i.e., the entry for today minus 353 years. The entries are typically short – a few hundred words – and loaded with now-obscure references that, if any sense is to be made of them, require unpacking. What happens is that readers, in a flurry of comments, engage in that unpacking. Some research the meanings of archaic terms – “What is a scallop whisk?” Some provide historical context – “It's almost Christmas, why aren't they making a big deal about it?” Some work to connect the current entry to previous ones – “What are the workmen repairing in the basement?”

PepysDiary enables kairos in three ways. First, the daily posting of a single entry serves as a powerful mechanism to focus readers' attention. Although readers can in principal comment on any entry, it is today's entry that attracts the crowd. Second, the unusual nature of the subject matter – daily life in London 350 years ago – attracts a *particular* crowd, and that in turn constrains the conversation. Elucidating history and the ongoing narrative of Pepys is valued; off-topic discussion, including social interaction, is discouraged. Finally, having gathered this crowd, the diary entry creates a rich set of opportunities for participation. What was commonplace three centuries ago is now arcane, and thus creates a space for questions, discussions and explanations

However, today PepysDiary is sadly changed from what it was a decade ago. The site had a lively conversational life for its first ten years – the span of time Pepys' diary covered. When the diary came

to its end, the site took a brief intermission, and then started over, re-posting the diary entries from the beginning. But it kept the comments from the previous cycle. While that was sensible given that one of its goals is to accumulate knowledge about Pepys and his time, it did not serve the conversation well. During the first cycle, the empty space after each diary entry was rich in kairos, but the second time through, not so much. The space was filled with comments from ten years before that raised the obvious questions and unpacked the most bewildering terms. Furthermore, those who had contributed during the first cycle were no longer present, so the opportunities to contest a point, request elaboration or simply offer thanks vanished. While PepysDiary continues through its cycle, kairos, and new conversation, is mostly absent.

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While the rhetorical definition of kairos was developed to depict a phenomenon in real-time oral conversation, it applies well to the less-than-synchronous nature of mediated communication. The spaces that occur during the limerick game, the opportunities for private text chat during conference calls, the comment streams after each of the Pepys' diary entries, all afford kairos. Each case brings together content and audience and interaction channels to create a long moment in which people may meaningfully connect.

While social media systems have grown far beyond their beginnings in textual media like chat and bulletin board systems, I've not noticed a corresponding improvement in the conversations they support. Though we can share images and videos, though we can follow and friend one another, though we can bestow likes and thumbs up, where are the rich and nuanced conversations that should accompany all this?

Perhaps it is time to think about kairos. I believe the concept of kairos is a valuable lens for understanding and designing social media. Kairos puts the focus on time, on the way in which the site structures interaction among people. Social media is not just about enabling people to share content with one another, it is about enabling them to create the opportune moments in which meaningful communication may occur. Regardless of whether we look at Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Wikipedia or any other social media site, we will see ways in which the sites' designs provide mechanisms that enable, or suppress, the production of kairos. Ultimately it is meaningful, responsive interaction among users – the telling remark, the apt retort, the timely expression of concern – that is the heart of social media.